

# The Avoidance of Love

## A READING OF *KING LEAR*

A common way to remember the history of writing about Shakespeare is to say that until Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* appeared in 1904, and culminating there, its main tradition had concentrated on Shakespeare's characters, while in recent generations emphasis has fallen on general patterns of meaning, systems of image or metaphor or symbol now taking the brunt of significance. Like most intellectual maps, this one is not only crude but fails worst in locating the figures one would like best to reach: Can Coleridge or Bradley really be understood as interested in characters *rather than* in the words of the play; or are the writings of Empson or G. Wilson Knight well used in saying that they are interested in what is happening in the words *rather than* what is happening in the speakers of the words? It is, however, equally easy and unhelpful to say that both ends of the tradition have been interested *both* in characters *and* in their words, first because this suggests that there are two things each end is interested in, whereas both would or should insist that they are interested only in one thing, the plays themselves; second, because there is clearly a shift in emphasis within that tradition, and a way of remarking that shift is to say that it moves away from studies of character into studies of words, and because such a shift raises problems of

Citations to the text of *King Lear* are from K. Muir, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952, Arden Edition).

history and of criticism which ought not to be muffled in handy accommodations.

A full description, let alone explanation, of the history of Shakespearean criticism would be part of a full description of Western cultural history since the Renaissance. Failing that, one can still notice that the simply described shift from character to words is implicated in various more or less primitive theories whose hold on contemporary scholars is yet to be traced. For suppose we ask *why* such a shift has occurred. Immediately this becomes two questions: What has discouraged attention from investigations of character? What, apart from this, has specifically motivated an absorbing attention to words? I think that one reason a critic may shun direct contact with characters is that he has been made to believe or assume, by some philosophy or other, that characters are not people, that what can be known about people cannot be known about characters, and in particular that psychology is either not appropriate to the study of these fictional beings or that psychology is the province of psychologists and not to be ventured from the armchairs of literary studies. But is any of this more than the merest assumption; unexamined principles which are part of current academic fashion? For what is the relevant psychology? Of course, to account for the behavior of characters one is going to apply predicates like "is in pain," "is ironic," "is jealous," "is thinking of . . ." to them. But does that require psychological expertise? No more than to apply these predicates to one's acquaintances. One reason a critic is drawn to words is, immediately, that attention to characters has often in fact been given apart from attention to the specific words granted them, so it looks as if attention to character is a distraction from the only, or the final, evidence there is for a reading of a literary work, namely the words themselves. But it is then unclear what the words are to be used as evidence for. For a correct interpretation? But what would an interpretation then be of? It often emerges that the evidence provided by the words is to support something called the symbolic structure or the pattern of something or other in the piece. But such concepts are bits of further theories which escape any support the mere presence of words can provide. Moreover, there is more than one procedure which could count as "attending to words themselves." (Just as there is more than one way of expressing "faithfulness

to a text.") The New Critics encouraged attention to the ambiguities, patternings, tensions of words; the picture is of a (more or less hidden) structure of which the individual words are parts. Another mode of attention to the particular words themselves is directed to the voice which says them, and through that to the phenomenology of the straits of mind in which only those words said in that order will suffice; here the picture is of a spiritual instant or passage for which only these words discover release, in which they mean deeply not because they mean many things but because they mean one thing completely. This is not necessarily a matter of better or worse but of different modes or needs of poetry.

It seems reasonable to suppose that the success of the New Criticism in the academic study of literature is a function of the way it is *teachable*: you can train someone to read complex poems with sufficient complexity, there is always something to say about them. But it is not clear what would count as training someone to read a lyric. You will have to demonstrate how it rests in the voice, or hauls at it, and you perhaps will not be able to do that without undergoing the spiritual instant or passage for which it discovers release (that is, unable to say what it means without meaning it then and there); and you may or may not be able to do that during a given morning's class, and either eventuality is likely to be inopportune in that place.

The most curious feature of the shift and conflict between character criticism and verbal analysis is that it should have taken place at all. How could any serious critic ever have forgotten that to care about a specific character is to care about the utterly specific words he says when and as he says them; or that we care about the utterly specific words of a play because certain men and women are having to give voice to them? Yet apparently both frequently happen. Evidently what is to be remembered here is difficult to remember, or difficult to do—like attending with utter specificity to the person now before you, or to yourself. It has been common enough to complain of the overinterpretation a critic may be led to, or may have recourse to; the problem, however, is to show us where and why and how to bring an interpretation to a close. (This is no easier than, perhaps no different from, discovering when and how to stop philosophizing. Wittgenstein congratulated himself for having made

this possible, saying that in this discovery philosophy is given peace (*Investigations*, §133.)

My purpose here is not to urge that in reading Shakespeare's plays one put words back into the characters speaking them, and replace characters from our possession back into their words. The point is rather to learn something about what prevents these commendable activities from taking place. It is a matter of learning what it is one uses as data for one's assertions about such works, what kinds of appeal one in fact finds convincing. I should like to add that identical problems arise in considering the phenomenon of ordinary language philosophy: there the problem is also raised of determining the data from which philosophy proceeds and to which it appeals, and specifically the issue is one of placing the words and experiences with which philosophers have always begun in alignment with human beings in particular circumstances who can be imagined to be having those experiences and saying and meaning those words. This is all that "ordinary" in the phrase "ordinary language philosophy" means, or ought to mean. It does not refer to particular words of wide use, nor to particular sorts of men. It reminds us that whatever words are said and meant are said and meant by particular men, and that to understand what they (the words) mean you must understand what they (whoever is using them) mean, and that sometimes men do not see what they mean, that usually they cannot say what they mean, that for various reasons they may not know what they mean, and that when they are forced to recognize this they feel they do not, and perhaps cannot, mean anything, and they are struck dumb. (Here it is worth investigating the fact that the formula "He said . . ." can introduce either indirect discourse or direct quotation. One might feel: Indirect discourse doesn't literally report what someone *said*, it says what he *meant*. Then why do we say "He said . . ." rather than "He meant . . .", an equally common formula, but used for other purposes? Perhaps the reason is that what is said is normally what is meant, even that what is said is necessarily normally what is meant—if there is to be language. Not more than normally, however, because there are any number of (specific) ways in which and occasions on which one's words do not say what one means. Because the connection between using a word and meaning what it says is not inevitable or automatic, one may wish to call it a matter of convention. But then one must not suppose that it is a

convention we would know how to forgo. It is not a matter of convenience or ritual, unless having language is a convenience or unless thinking and speaking are rituals.) If philosophy sometimes looks as if it wishes nothing more than to strike us dumb, then it should not be overlooked that philosophy also claims to know only what an ordinary man can know, and that we are liable to silence so produced only because we have already spoken, hence thought, hence justified and excused, hence philosophized, and are hence always liable not merely to say more than we know (a favorite worry of modern philosophy) but to speak above the conscience at the back of our words, deaf to our meaning. A philosopher like Austin, it is true, concentrates on examples whose meaning can be brought out by appealing to widely shared, or easily imaginable, circumstances (once he has given directions for imagining them)—circumstances, roughly, that Wittgenstein refers to as one of “our language games.” But Wittgenstein is also concerned with forms of words whose meaning cannot be elicited in this way—words we sometimes have it at heart to say but whose meaning is not secured by appealing to the way they are ordinarily (commonly) used, because there is no ordinary use of them, in that sense. It is not, therefore, that I mean something *other* than those words would ordinarily mean, but rather that what they mean, and whether they mean anything, depends solely upon whether I am using them so as to make my meaning. (An instance cited by Wittgenstein is Luther’s remark that “Faith resides under the left nipple.”) In general, Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations* moves into this region of meaning. It is a region habitually occupied by poetry.

*King Lear* is particularly useful as a source for investigating the question of critical data and for assessing some causes of critical disagreement because there are a number of traditional cruxes in this play for which any critic is likely to feel compelled to provide his own solution. Some important ones are these: How are we to understand Lear’s motivation in his opening scene? How Cordelia’s? Is Gloucester’s blinding dramatically justified? What is the relation between the Lear plot and the Gloucester sub-plot? What happens to the Fool? Why does Edgar delay before revealing himself to his father? Why does Gloucester set out for Dover? Why does France not return with Cordelia? Why must Cordelia die?

In the first half of this essay I offer a reading of the play sticking

as continuously to the text as I can—that is, avoiding theorizing about the data I provide for my assertions, appealing to any considerations which, in conscience, convince me of their correctness—in the course of which the traditional cruxes are either answered or altered. Then, in the second half, I ask why it is, if what I say is correct, that critics have failed to see it. This precipitates somewhat extended speculations about the difficulties in the perception of such drama as *King Lear* presents, and I do not expect, even if my reading were accepted, that these speculations will find very immediate assent, nor even very readily be found relevant. But since whatever critical discoveries I can claim to have made hardly result from unheard of information, full conviction in them awaits a convincing account of what has kept them covered.

## I

In a fine paper published a few years ago, Professor Paul Alpers notes the tendency of modern critics to treat metaphors or symbols rather than the characters and actions of Shakespeare's plays as primary data in understanding them, and undertakes to disconfirm a leading interpretation of the symbolic sort which exactly depends upon a neglect, even a denial, of the humanness of the play's characters.<sup>1</sup> If I begin by finding fault with his reading, I put him first to acknowledge my indebtedness to his work. His animus is polemical and in the end this animus betrays him. For he fails to account for the truth to which that leading interpretation is responding, and in his concern to insist that the characters of the play are human beings confronting one another, he fails to characterize them as specific persons. He begins by assembling quotations from several commentators which together comprise the view he wishes to correct—the view of the "sight pattern":

In *King Lear* an unusual amount of imagery drawn from vision and the eyes prompts us to apprehend a symbolism of sight and blindness having its culmination in Gloucester's tragedy. . . . The blinding

<sup>1</sup>"*King Lear* and the Theory of the Sight Pattern," in R. Brower and R. Poirier, eds. *In Defense of Reading* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1963), pp. 133-52.

of Gloucester might well be gratuitous melodrama but for its being imbedded in a field of meanings centered in the concept of *seeing*. This sight pattern relentlessly brings into the play the problem of seeing and what is always implied is that the problem is one of insight. . . . It is commonly recognized that just as Lear finds "reason in madness" so Gloucester learns to "see" in his blindness. . . . The whole play is built on this double paradox.<sup>2</sup>

But when Alpers looks to the text for evidence for this theory he discovers that there is none. Acts of vision and references to eyes are notably present, but their function is not to symbolize moral insight; rather, they insist upon the ordinary, literal uses of eyes: to express feeling, to weep, and to recognize others. Unquestionably there is truth in this. But the evidence for Alpers' view is not perfectly clear and his concepts are not accurately explored in terms of the events of the play. The acts of vision named in the lines he cites are those of giving *looks* and of *staring*, and the function of these acts is exactly *not* to express feeling, or else to express cruel feeling. Why? Because the power of the eyes to see is being used in isolation from their capacity to weep, which seems the most literal use of them to express feeling.

Alpers' dominant insistence upon the third ordinary use of the eyes, their role in recognizing others, counters common readings of the two moments of recognition central to the "sight pattern": Gloucester's recognition of Edgar's innocence and Lear's recognition of Cordelia. "The crucial issue is not insight, but recognition" (Alpers, p. 149): Gloucester is not enabled to "see" because he is blinded, the truth is heaped upon him from Regan's luxuriant cruelty; Cordelia need not be viewed symbolically, the infinite poignance of her reconciliation with Lear is sufficiently accounted for by his literal recognition of her. —But then it becomes incomprehensible why or how these children have *not* been recognized by these parents; they had not become literally invisible. They are in each case banished, disowned, sent out of sight. And the question remains: What makes it possible for them to be *received* again?

<sup>2</sup> Alpers gives the references for the elements of his quotation as follows: J. I. M. Stewart, *Character and Motive in Shakespeare* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949), pp. 20–21; R. B. Heilman, *This Great Stage* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1948), p. 25; L. C. Knights, *Some Shakespearean Themes* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), p. 107; *King Lear*, ed. K. Muir (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952, Arden edition), lx.

In each case, there is a condition necessary in order that the recognition take place: Gloucester and Lear must each first recognize himself, and allow himself to be recognized, revealed to another. In Gloucester, the recognition comes at once, on hearing Regan's news:

O my follies! Then Edgar was abused.  
Kind Gods, forgive me that, and prosper him!

(III, vii, 90-91)

In each of these two lines he puts his recognition of himself first. Lear's self-revelation comes harder, but when it comes it has the same form:

Do not laugh at me;  
For, as I am a man, I think this lady  
To be my child Cordelia.

(IV, vii, 68-70)

He refers to himself three times, then "my child" recognizes her simultaneously with revealing himself (as her father). Self-recognition is, phenomenologically, a form of insight; and it is because of its necessity in recognizing others that critics have felt its presence here.<sup>3</sup>

Lear does not attain his insight until the end of the fourth Act, and when he does it is climactic. This suggests that Lear's dominating motivation to this point, from the time things go wrong in the opening scene, is *to avoid being recognized*. The isolation and avoidance of eyes is what the obsessive sight imagery of the play underlines. This is the clue I want to follow first in reading out the play.

If the blinding is unnecessary for Gloucester's true seeing of Edgar, why is Gloucester blinded? Alpers' suggestion, in line with his emphasis on the literal presence of eyes, is that because the eyes are physically the most precious and most vulnerable of human organs, the physical assault on them best dramatizes man's capacity for

<sup>3</sup> This of course is not to say that such critics have correctly interpreted this feeling of insight, and it does not touch Alpers' claim that such critics have in particular interpreted "moral insight" as "the perception of moral truths"; nor, finally does it weaken Alpers' view of such an interpretation as moralizing, hence evading, the significance of (this) tragedy. I am not, that is, regarding Alpers and the critics with whom, on this point, he is at odds, as providing alternative readings of the play, between which I am choosing or adjudicating. Their relation is more complex. Another way of seeing this is to recognize that Alpers does not deny the presence of a controlling "sight pattern" in *King Lear*, but he transforms the significance of this pattern.



cruelty. But if the symbolic interpretation seems hysterical, this explanation seems overcasual, and in any case does not follow the words. Critics who have looked for a *meaning* in the blinding have been looking for the right thing. But they have been looking for an aesthetic meaning or justification; looking too high, as it were. It is aesthetically justified (it is "not an irrelevant horror" (Muir, p. lx)) just because it is morally, spiritually justified, in a way which directly relates the eyes to their power to see.

GLOU. . . . but I shall see  
The winged vengeance overtake such children.  
CORN. See't shalt thou never. . . .

(III, vii, 64-66)

And then Cornwall puts out one of Gloucester's eyes. A servant interposes, wounding Cornwall; then Regan stabs the servant from behind, and his dying words, meant to console or establish connection with Gloucester, ironically recall Cornwall to his interrupted work:

FIRST SERV. O! I am slain. My Lord, you have one eye left  
To see some mischief on him. Oh! *Dies.*  
CORN. Lest it see more, prevent it. Out, vile jelly!

(III, vii, 80-82)

Of course the idea of punishment by plucking out eyes has been implanted earlier, by Lear and by Goneril and most recently by Gloucester himself, and their suggestions implicate all of them spiritually in Cornwall's deed. But Cornwall himself twice gives the immediate cause of his deed, once for each eye: to prevent Gloucester from seeing, and in particular to prevent him from seeing *him*. That this scene embodies the most open expression of cruelty is true enough; and true that it suggests the limitlessness of cruelty, once it is given its way—that it will find its way to the most precious objects. It is also true that the scene is symbolic, but what it symbolizes is a function of what it means. The physical cruelty symbolizes (or instances) the psychic cruelty which pervades the play; but what this particular act of cruelty means is that cruelty cannot bear to be seen. It literalizes evil's ancient love of darkness.

This relates the blinding to Cornwall's needs; but it is also related to necessities of Gloucester's character. It has an aptness which

takes on symbolic value, the horrible aptness of retribution. (It is not merely literary critics who look for meaning in suffering, attempting to rationalize it. Civilizations have always done it, in their myths and laws; men do it in their dreams and fears of vengeance. They learned to do it from Gods.) For Gloucester has a fault, not particularly egregious, in fact common as dirt, but in a tragic accumulation in which society disgorges itself upon itself, it shows clearly enough; and I cannot understand his immediate and complete acquiescence in the fate which has befallen him (his acknowledgment of his folly, his acceptance of Edgar's innocence, and his wish for forgiveness all take just twenty syllables) without supposing that it strikes him as a retribution, forcing him to an insight about his life as a whole. Not, however, necessarily a true insight. He has revealed his fault in the opening speeches of the play, in which he tells Kent of his *shame*. (That shame is the subject of those speeches is emphasized by Coleridge; but he concentrates, appropriately enough, on *Edmund's* shame.) He says that now he is "braz'd to it," that is, used to admitting that he has fathered a bastard, and also perhaps carrying the original sense of soldered fast to it. He recognizes the moral claim upon himself, as he says twice, to "acknowledge" his bastard; but all this means to him is that he acknowledge that he has a bastard for a son. He does not acknowledge *him*, as a son or a person, with *his* feelings of illegitimacy and being cast out. *That* is something Gloucester ought to be ashamed of; his shame is itself more shameful than his one piece of licentiousness. This is one of the inconveniences of shame, that it is generally inaccurate, attaches to the wrong thing.

In case these remarks should seem inappropriate in view of the moment at which Shakespeare wrote, and someone wishes at this stage to appeal to the conventions of Elizabethan theater according to which a Bastard is an evil character, hence undeserving of the audience's sympathy, and thereby suggest that it is unthinkable that Gloucester should feel anything other than a locker room embarrassment at what has sprung from him, then I should ask that two points be borne in mind: (1) It is a particular man, call him Shakespeare, we are dealing with, and while it is doubtless true that a knowledge of the conventions he inherited is indispensable to the full understanding of his work, the idea that these conventions supply him with solutions to his artistic purposes, rather than problems or media within which those purposes are worked out, is as sensible as supposing that

one has explained why a particular couple have decided to divorce by saying that divorce is a social form. (There are, of course, proper occasions for explanations of that kind; for example, an explanation of why separation is not the same as divorce.) Shakespeare's plays are conventional in the way that their language is grammatical, in the way that a football game satisfies the rules of football: one has to know them to understand what is happening, but consulting them will not tell you who plays or speaks well and who mechanically, nor why a given remark or a particular play was made *here*, nor who won and who lost. You have to know something more for that, and you have to look. (2) At the moment at which *King Lear* was written, Sir Robert Filmer was an adolescent. It is hard not to suppose that when this eldest son and pillar of society wrote his defense of patriarchal society, and consequently of primogeniture, he was talking about something which had been problematic since his youth and something which needed his defense in 1630 because it was by then becoming openly questioned.<sup>4</sup> But this is perfectly clear from Edmund's opening soliloquy. The idea that Shakespeare favored primogeniture, or supposed that only a bastard would question it, is one which must come from a source beyond Shakespeare's words. In that soliloquy Edmund rails equally against his treatment as a bastard and as a younger son—as if to ask why a younger son should be treated like a bastard. Both social institutions seem to him arbitrary and unnatural. And nothing in the play shows him to be wrong—certainly not the behavior of Lear's legitimate older daughters, nor of Regan's lawful husband, nor of legitimate King Lear, who goes through an abdication without abdicating, and whose last legitimate act is to banish love and service from his realm. When Shakespeare writes a revenge tragedy, it is *Hamlet*; and when he presents us with a Bastard, legitimacy as a whole is thrown into question.

That Gloucester still feels shame about his son is shown not just by his descriptions of himself, but also by the fact that Edmund “. . . hath been out nine years, and away he shall again” (*I, i, 32*), and by the fact that Gloucester has to joke about him: joking is a familiar specific for brazening out shame, calling enlarged attention to the thing you do not want naturally noticed. (Hence the comedian sports disfigurement.) But if the failure to recognize others is a fail-

<sup>4</sup> See the Introduction by Peter Laslett to his edition of Filmer's *Patriarcha* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1949).

ure to let others recognize you, a fear of what is revealed to them, an avoidance of their eyes, then it is exactly shame which is the cause of his withholding of recognition. (It is not simply his legal treatment that Edmund is railing against.) For shame is the specific discomfort produced by the sense of being looked at, the avoidance of the sight of others is the reflex it produces. Guilt is different; there the reflex is to avoid discovery. As long as no one *knows* what you have done, you are safe; or your conscience will press you to confess it and accept punishment. Under shame, what must be covered up is not your deed, but yourself. It is a more primitive emotion than guilt, as inescapable as the possession of a body, the first object of shame. —Gloucester suffers the same punishment he inflicts: in his respectability, he avoided eyes; when respectability falls away and the disreputable come into power, his eyes are avoided. In the fear of Gloucester's poor eyes there is the promise that cruelty can be overcome, and instruction about how it can be overcome. That is the content which justifies the scene of his blinding, aesthetically, psychologically, morally.

This raises again the question of the relation between the Gloucester sub-plot and the Lear plot. The traditional views seem on the whole to take one of two lines: Gloucester's fate parallels Lear's in order that it become more universal (because Gloucester is an ordinary man, not a distant King, or because in happening to more than one it may happen to any); or more concrete (since Gloucester suffers physically what Lear suffers psychically). Such suggestions are not wrong, but they leave out of account the specific climactic moment at which the sub-plot surfaces and Lear and Gloucester face one another.

EDGAR. I would not take this from report; it is,  
And my heart breaks at it.

(*IV, vi, 142-143*)

I have felt that, but more particularly I have felt an obscurer terror at this moment than at any other in the play. The considerations so far introduced begin, I think, to explain the source of that feeling.

Two questions immediately arise about that confrontation: (1) This is the scene in which Lear's madness is first broken through; in the next scene he is reassembling his sanity. Both the breaking through and the reassembling are manifested by his *recognizing* someone, and my first question is: Why is it Gloucester whom Lear is

first able to recognize from his madness, and in recognizing whom his sanity begins to return? (2) *What* does Lear see when he recognizes Gloucester? What is he confronted by?

1. Given our notion that recognizing a person depends upon allowing oneself to be recognized by him, the question becomes: Why is it Gloucester whose recognition Lear is first able to bear? The obvious answer is: Because Gloucester is blind. Therefore one can be, can only be, *recognized by him without being seen*, without having to bear eyes upon oneself.

Leading up to Lear's acknowledgment ("I know thee well enough . . .") there is that insane flight of exchanges about Gloucester's eyes; it is the only active cruelty given to Lear by Shakespeare, apart from his behavior in the abdication scene. But here it seems uncaused, deliberate cruelty inflicted for its own sake upon Gloucester's eyes.

GLOU.

Dost thou know me?

LEAR. I remember thine eyes well enough. Dost thou squiny at me?

No, do thy worst, blind Cupid; I'll not love.

Read thou this challenge; mark but the penning of it.

(*IV, vi, 137-140*)

(This last line, by the way, and Gloucester's response to it, seems a clear enough reference to Gloucester's reading of Edmund's letter, carrying here the suggestion that he was blind then.)

GLOU. Were all thy letters suns [sons?], I could not see.

LEAR. Read.

GLOU. What! with the case of eyes?

LEAR. Oh, ho! are you there with me? No eyes in your head, not no money in your purse? Your eyes are in a heavy case, your purse in a light: yet you see how this world goes.

GLOU. I see it feelingly.

LEAR. What! art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. . . .

Get thee glass eyes;

And, like a scurvy politician, seem  
To see the things thou dost not. . . .

(*IV, vi, 141-151; 172-174*)

Lear is picking at Gloucester's eyes, as if to make sure they are really gone. When he is sure, he recognizes him:

If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes;  
 I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester. . . .  
 (*IV, vi, 178-179*)

(Here "take my eyes" can be read as a crazy consolation: your eyes wouldn't have done you any good anyway in this case; you would need to see what I have seen to weep my fortunes; I would give up my eyes not to have seen it.)

This picking spiritually relates Lear to Cornwall's and Regan's act in first blinding Gloucester, for Lear does what he does for the same reason they do—in order not to be seen by this man, whom he has brought harm. (Lear exits from this scene running. From what? From "A Gentleman, with Attendants." His first words to them are: "No rescue? What! A prisoner?" But those questions had interrupted the Gentleman's opening words to him, "Your most dear daughter—". Lear runs not because in his madness he cannot distinguish friends from enemies but because he knows that recognition of himself is imminent. Even madness is no rescue.)

2. This leads to the second question about the scene: What is Lear confronted by in acknowledging Gloucester? It is easy to say: Lear is confronted here with the direct consequences of his conduct, of his covering up in rage and madness, of his having given up authority and kingdom for the wrong motives, to the wrong people; and he is for the first time confronting himself. What is difficult is to show that this is not merely or vaguely symbolic, and that it is not merely an access of knowledge which Lear undergoes. Gloucester has by now become not just a figure "parallel" to Lear, but Lear's double; he does not merely represent Lear, but is psychically identical with him. So that what comes to the surface in this meeting is not a related story, but Lear's submerged mind. This, it seems to me, is what gives the scene its particular terror, and gives to the characters what neither could have alone. In this fusion of plots and identities, we have the great image, the double or mirror image, of everyman who has gone to every length to avoid himself, caught at the moment of coming upon himself face to face. (Against this, "take my eyes" strikes psychotic power.)

The identity is established at the end of the blinding scene, by Regan:

Go thrust him out at gates, and let him smell  
His way to Dover.

(*III, vii, 92-93*)

It is by now commonly appreciated that Gloucester had, when that scene began, no plans for going to Dover. Interpreters have accounted for this discrepancy by suggesting that Shakespeare simply wanted all his characters present at Dover for the climax, adding that the repeated question "Wherefore to Dover?" may have put that destination in Gloucester's mind, which has been kicked out of shape. But this interprets the wrong thing, for it overlooks the more obvious, anyway the first, discrepancy. The question is why *Regan* assumes that he is going to Dover. (Her husband, for example, does not: "Turn out that eyeless villain.") We may wish here to appeal to those drummed "Dover's" to explain her mind, and to suppose that she associates that name with the gathering of all her enemies. But the essential fact is that the name is primarily caught to the image of her father. In her mind, the man she is sending on his way to Dover is the man she *knows* is sent on his way to Dover: in her paroxysms of cruelty, she imagines that she has just participated in blinding her father.

And Gloucester apparently thinks so too, for he then, otherwise inexplicably, sets out for Dover. "Otherwise inexplicably": for it is *no* explanation to say that "the case-histories of suicides contain stranger obsessive characteristics than this" (Muir, xlix). There is no reason, at this stage—other than our cultural advantage in having read the play before—to assume that Gloucester is planning suicide. He sets out for Dover because he is *sent* there: by himself, in sending Lear, in whose identity he is now submerged; and by the thrust of Regan's evil and confusion. But he has no *reason* to go there, not even some inexplicable wish to commit suicide there. At the beginning of the plan to go to Dover he says "I have no way" (*IV, i, 18*). It is only at the end of that scene that he mentions Dover *cliff* (*IV, i, 73*). One can, of course, explain that he had been thinking of the cliff all along. But what the text suggests is that, rather than taking a plan for suicide as our explanation for his insistence on using Dover cliff, we ought to

see his thought of the cliff, and consequently of suicide, as *his* explanation of his otherwise mysterious mission to Dover. Better suicide than no reason at all.

When Shakespeare's lapses in plot construction are noticed, critics who know that he is nevertheless the greatest of the bards undertake to excuse him, or to justify the lapse by the great beauty of its surroundings. A familiar excuse is that the lapse will in any case not be noticed in performance. No doubt there are lapses of this kind, and no doubt they can sometimes be covered by such excuses. But it ought also to occur to us that what looks like a lapse is sometimes meant, and that our failure to notice the lapse is just that, our failure. This is what has happened to us in the present scene. We "do not notice" Regan's confusion of identity because we share it, and in failing to understand Gloucester's blanked condition (or rather, in insisting upon understanding it from our point of view) we are doing what the characters in the play are seen to do: we avoid him. And so we are implicated in the failures we are witnessing, we share the responsibility for tragedy.

This is further confirmed in another outstanding lapse, or crux—Gloucester's appearance, led by an old man, to Edgar-Tom. The question, as generally asked, is: Why does Edgar wait, on seeing his father blind, and hearing that his father knows his mistake, before revealing himself to him? The answers which suggest themselves to that question are sophisticated, not the thing itself. For example: Edgar wants to clear himself in the eyes of the world before revealing himself. (But he could still let his *father* know. Anyway, he does tell his father before he goes to challenge Edmund.) Edgar "wants to impose a penance on his father, and to guarantee the genuineness and permanence of the repentance" (Muir, 1). (This seems to me psychologically fantastic; it suggests that the first thing which occurs to Edgar on seeing his father blinded is to exact some further punishment. Or else it makes Edgar into a monster of righteousness; whereas he is merely self-righteous.) Edgar wants to cure his father of his desire to commit suicide. (But *revealing himself* would seem the surest and most immediate way to do that.) And so on. My dissatisfaction with these answers is not that they are psychological explanations, but that they are explanations of the wrong thing, produced by the wrong question: Why does Edgar *delay*? "Delay" implies he is



going to later. But we do not *know* (at this stage) that he will; we do not so much as know that he intends to. In terms of our reading of the play so far, we are alerted to the fact that what Edgar does is most directly described as *avoiding recognition*. That is what we want an explanation for.

And first, this action bears the same meaning, or has the same consequences, it always has in this play: mutilating cruelty. This is explicit in one of Gloucester's first utterances after the blinding, led into Edgar's presence:

Oh! dear son Edgar,  
The food of thy abused father's wrath;  
Might I but live to see thee in my touch,  
I'd say I had eyes again.

(IV, i, 21-24)

So Edgar's avoidance of Gloucester's recognition precisely deprives Gloucester of his eyes again. This links him, as Lear was and will be linked, to Cornwall and the sphere of open evil.

This reading also has consequences for our experience of two subsequent events of the play.

1. In a play in which, as has often been said, each of the characters is either very good or very bad, this revelation of Edgar's capacity for cruelty—and the *same* cruelty as that of the evil characters—shows how radically implicated good is in evil; in a play of disguises, how often they are disguised. And Edgar is the ruler at the end of the play, Lear's successor, the man who must, in Albany's charge, "the gor'd state sustain." (A very equivocal charge, containing no assurance that its body may be nursed back to health; but simply nursed.) If good is to grow anywhere in this state, it must recognize, and face, its continuity with, its location within a maze of evil. Edgar's is the most Christian sensibility in the play, as Edmund's is the most Machiavellian. If the Machiavellian fails in the end, he very nearly succeeds; and if the Christian succeeds, his success is deeply compromised.

2. To hold to the fact that Edgar is avoiding recognition makes better sense to me of that grotesque guiding of Gloucester up no hill to no cliff to no suicide than any other account I know. The special

quality of this scene, with its purest outbreak of grotesquerie, has been recognized at least since Wilson Knight's essay of 1930.<sup>5</sup> But to regard it as *symbolic* of the play's emphasis on the grotesque misses what makes it so grotesque, and fails to account for the fact that Edgar and Gloucester find themselves in this condition. It is grotesque because it is so *literal* a consequence of avoiding the facts. It is not the emblem of the Lear universe, but an instance of what has led its minds to their present state: there are no lengths to which we may not go in order to avoid being revealed, even to those we love and are loved by. Or rather, especially to those we love and are loved by: to other people it is *easy* not to be known. That grotesque walk is not full of promise for our lives. It is not, for example, a picture of mankind making its way up Purgatory;<sup>6</sup> for Gloucester's character is not purified by it, but extirpated. It shows what people will *have* to say and try to mean to one another when they are incapable of acknowledging to one another what they have to acknowledge. To fill this scene with nourishing, profound meaning is to see it from Edgar's point of view; that is, to avoid what is there. Edgar is Ahab, trying to harpoon the meaning of his life into something external to it; and we believe him, and serve him. He is Hedda Gabler, with her ugly demand for beauty. In the fanciful, childish deceit of his plan, he is Tom Sawyer in the last chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*, enveloping Jim's prison with symbols of escape, instead of opening the door.

If one wishes a psychological explanation for Edgar's behavior, the question to be answered is: Why does Edgar avoid his father's recognition? Two answers suggest themselves. (1) He is himself ashamed and guilty. He was as gullible as his father was to Edmund's "invention." He failed to confront his father, to trust his love, exactly as his father had failed him. He is as responsible for his father's blinding as his father is. He wants to make it up to his father before asking for his recognition—to make it up instead of repenting, acknowledging; he wants to *do* something instead of stopping and seeing. So he goes on doing the very thing which needs making up for. (2) He cannot bear the fact that his father is incapable, impotent, maimed.

<sup>5</sup> "King Lear and the Comedy of the Grotesque," one of the studies comprising *The Wheel of Fire*, originally published by Oxford University Press, 1930; published in the fifth revised edition by Meridian Books, Inc., New York, 1957.

<sup>6</sup> Suggested by R. W. Chambers, *King Lear*, 1940; cited by Muir, p. 1.

He wants his father still to be a father, powerful, so that *he* can remain a child. For otherwise they are simply two human beings in need of one another, and it is not usual for parents and children to manage that transformation, becoming for one another nothing more, but nothing less, than unaccommodated men. That is what Lear took Edgar to be, but that was a mad, ironic compliment; to become natural again, men need to do more than remove their clothes; for they can also cover up their embarrassment by nakedness. Men have their inventions, their accommodations.

We learn in the course of Edgar's tale, after his successful duel with Edmund, when it was that he brought himself to allow his father to recognize him:

Never—O fault!—revealed myself unto him  
Until some half-hour past, when I was arm'd. . . .

(*V, iii*, 192-193)

*Armed*, and with the old man all but seeped away, he feels safe enough to give his father vision again and bear his recognition. As sons fear, and half wish, it is fatal. Now he will never know whether, had he challenged recognition when recognition was denied, at home, both of them could have survived it. That Edgar is so close to the thing love demands contributes to the grotesque air of the late scenes with his father.<sup>7</sup> Love does maintain itself under betrayal; it does allow, and forward, its object's wish to find the edge of its own existence; it does not shrink from recognition that its object is headed for, or has survived, radical change, with its attendant destructions—which is the way love knows that a betrayal is ended, and is why it provides the context for new innocence. But Edgar does not know that love which has such power also has the power to kill, and, in going to the lengths he takes it, must be capable of absolute scrupulousness. It cannot lead, it can only accompany, past the point it has been, and it must feel that point. It is Edgar's self-assurance here which mocks his Christian thoroughness.



We now have elements with which to begin an analysis of the most controversial of the *Lear* problems, the nature of Lear's motiva-

<sup>7</sup> The passage from this sentence to the end of the paragraph was added as the result of a conversation with Rose Mary Harbison.

tion in his opening (abdication) scene. The usual interpretations follow one of three main lines: Lear is senile; Lear is puerile; Lear is not to be understood in natural terms, for the whole scene has a fairy tale or ritualistic character which simply must be accepted as the premise from which the tragedy is derived. Arguments ensue, in each case, about whether Shakespeare is justified in what he is asking his audience to accept. My hypothesis will be that Lear's behavior in this scene is explained by—the tragedy begins because of—the same motivation which manipulates the tragedy throughout its course, from the scene which precedes the abdication, through the storm, blinding, evaded reconciliations, to the final moments: by the attempt to avoid recognition, the shame of exposure, the threat of self-revelation.

Shame, first of all, is the right kind of candidate to serve as motive, because it is the emotion whose effect is most precipitate and out of proportion to its cause, which is just the rhythm of the *King Lear* plot as a whole. And with this hypothesis we need not assume that Lear is either incomprehensible or stupid or congenitally arbitrary and inflexible and extreme in his conduct. Shame itself is exactly arbitrary, inflexible and extreme in its effect. It is familiar to find that what mortifies one person seems wholly unimportant to another: think of being ashamed of one's origins, one's accent, one's ignorance, one's skin, one's clothes, one's legs or teeth. . . . It is the most isolating of feelings, the most comprehensible perhaps in idea, but the most incomprehensible or incommunicable in fact. Shame, I've said, is the most primitive, the most private, of emotions; but it is also the most primitive of *social* responses. With the discovery of the individual, whether in Paradise or in the Renaissance, there is the simultaneous discovery of the isolation of the individual; his presence to himself, but simultaneously to *others*. Moreover, shame is felt not only toward one's own actions and one's own being, but toward the actions and the being of those with whom one is identified—fathers, daughters, wives . . . , the beings whose self-revelations reveal oneself. Families, any objects of one's love and commitment, ought to be the places where shame is overcome (hence happy families are all alike); but they are also the place of its deepest manufacture, and one is then hostage to that power, or fugitive. —L. B. Campbell, in *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*,<sup>9</sup> collects valuable examples of

<sup>9</sup> New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1966; the quotation which follows is from pp. 181–182 of this edition. The book was first published in 1930 by the Cambridge University Press.

Renaissance "doctrine," and sorts them perspicuously around Shakespeare's topics. But she follows a typical assumption of such investigations—that if Shakespeare's work is to be illuminated by these contemporary doctrines, he must illustrate them. For example:

It must be evident, then, that there was in Shakespeare's day an old and firmly founded philosophy of anger, finding its sources in ancient medicine and ancient philosophy and in the mediaeval makings-over of those ancient sources as well. According to this philosophy, pride or self-esteem is the condition in which anger takes its rise, vengeance becomes its immediate object, and some slight, real or imagined, is its cause. Anger is folly; anger brings shame in its train. The sequence of passions is pride, anger, revenge, and unless madness clouds the reason altogether, shame.

But in *King Lear* shame comes first, and brings rage and folly in its train. Lear is not maddened because he had been wrathful, but because his shame brought his wrath upon the wrong object. It is not the fact of his anger but the irony of it, specifically and above all the *injustice* of it, which devours him.

That Lear is ashamed, or afraid of being shamed by a revelation, seems to be the Fool's understanding of his behavior. It is agreed that the Fool keeps the truth present to Lear's mind, but it should be stressed that the characteristic mode of the Fool's presentation is *ridicule*—the circumstance most specifically feared by shame (as accusation and discovery are most feared by guilt). Part of the exquisite pain of this Fool's comedy is that in riddling Lear with the truth of his condition he increases the very cause of that condition, as though shame should finally grow ashamed of itself, and stop. The other part of this pain is that it is the therapy prescribed by love itself. We know that since Cordelia's absence "the fool hath much pin'd away" (*I, iv, 78*), and it is generally assumed that this is due to his love for Cordelia. That need not be denied, but it should be obvious that it is directly due to his love for Lear; to his having to see the condition in Lear which his love is impotent to prevent, the condition moreover which his love has helped to cause, the precise condition therefore which his love is unable to comfort, since its touch wounds. This is why the Fool dies or disappears; from the terrible relevance, and the horrible irrelevance, of his only passion. This is the point of his connection with Cordelia, as will emerge.

I call Lear's shame a hypothesis, and what I have to say here will

perhaps be hard to make convincing. But primarily it depends upon not imposing the traditional interpretations upon the opening events. Lear is puerile? Lear senile? But the man who speaks Lear's words is in possession, if not fully in command, of a powerful, ranging mind; and its eclipse into madness only confirms its intelligence, not just because what he says in his madness is the work of a marked intelligence, but because the nature of his madness, his melancholy and antic disposition, its incessant invention, is the sign, in fact and in Renaissance thought, of genius; an option of escape open only to minds of the highest reach. How then can we understand such a mind seriously to believe that what Goneril and Regan are offering in that opening scene is love, proof of his value to them; and to believe that Cordelia is withholding love? We cannot so understand it, and so all the critics are right to regard Lear in this scene as psychologically incomprehensible, or as requiring a psychological make-up—if that is, we assume that Lear believes in Goneril and Regan and not in Cordelia. But we needn't assume that he believes anything of the kind.

We imagine that Lear *must* be wildly abused (blind, puerile, and the rest) because the thing works out so badly. But it doesn't *begin* badly, and it is far from incomprehensible conduct. It is, in fact, quite ordinary. A parent is bribing love out of his children; two of them accept the bribe, and despise him for it; the third shrinks from the attempt, as though from violation. Only this is a king, this bribe is the last he will be able to offer; everything in his life, and in the life of his state, depends upon its success. We need not assume that he does not know his two older daughters, and that they are giving him false coin in return for his real bribes, though perhaps like most parents he is willing not to notice it. But more than this: there is reason to assume that the open possibility—or the open fact—that they are *not* offering true love is exactly what he wants. Trouble breaks out only with Cordelia's "Nothing," and her broken resolution to be silent. —What does he want, and what is the meaning of the trouble which then breaks out?

Go back to the confrontation scene with Gloucester:

If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.

The obvious rhetoric of those words is that of an appeal, or a bargain. But it is also warning, and a command: If you weep for me, the

same thing will happen to me that happened to you; do not let me see what you are weeping for. Given the whole scene, with its concentrated efforts at warding off Gloucester, that line says explicitly what it is Lear is warding off: Gloucester's sympathy, his love. And earlier:

GLOU. O! Let me kiss that hand.

LEAR. Let me wipe it first, it smells of mortality.

(*IV, vi, 134-135*)

Mortality, the hand without rings of power on it, cannot be lovable. He feels unworthy of love when the reality of lost power comes over him. That is what his plan was to have avoided by exchanging his fortune for his love at one swap. He cannot bear love when he has no reason to be loved, perhaps because of the helplessness, the passiveness which that implies, which some take for impotence. And he wards it off for the reason for which people do ward off being loved, because it presents itself to them as a demand:

LEAR. No. Do thy worst, blind Cupid; I'll not love.

(*IV, vi, 139*)

Gloucester's presence strikes Lear as the demand for love; he knows he is being offered love; he tries to deny the offer by imagining that he has been solicited (this is the relevance of "blind Cupid" as the sign of a brothel); and he doesn't want to pay for it, for he may get it, and may not, and either is intolerable. Besides, he has recently done just that, paid his all for love. The long fantasy of his which precedes this line ("Let copulation thrive" . . . . "There is the sulphurous pit—burning, scalding, stench, consumption . . .") contains his most sustained expression of disgust with sexuality (ll. 116ff.)—as though furiously telling himself that what was wrong with his plan was not the debasement of love his bargain entailed, but the fact that love itself is inherently debased and so unworthy from the beginning of the bargain he had made for it. That is a maddening thought; but still more comforting than the truth. For some spirits, to be loved knowing you cannot return that love, is the most radical of psychic tortures.

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This is the way I understand that opening scene with the three daughters. Lear knows it is a bribe he offers, and—part of him any-

way—wants exactly what a bribe can buy: (1) false love; and (2) a public expression of love. That is: he wants something he does not have to return *in kind*, something which a division of his property fully pays for. And he wants to *look* like a loved man—for the sake of the subjects, as it were. He is perfectly happy with his little plan, until Cordelia speaks. Happy not because he is blind, but because he is getting what he wants, his plan is working. Cordelia is alarming precisely because he *knows* she is offering the real thing, offering something a more opulent third of his kingdom cannot, must not, repay; putting a claim upon him he cannot face. She threatens to expose both his plan for returning false love with no love, and expose the necessity for that plan—his terror of being loved, of needing love.

Reacting to over-sentimental or over-Christian interpretations of her character, efforts have been made to implicate her in the tragedy's source, convicting her of a willfulness and hardness kin to that later shown by her sisters. But her complicity is both less and more than such an interpretation envisages. That interpretation depends, first of all, upon taking her later speeches in the scene (after the appearance of France and Burgundy) as simply uncovering what was in her mind and heart from the beginning. But why? Her first utterance is the aside:

What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.

This, presumably, has been understood as indicating her decision to refuse her father's demand. But it needn't be. She asks herself what she can say; there is no necessity for taking the question to be rhetorical. She wants to obey her father's wishes (anyway, there is no reason to think otherwise at this stage, or at any other); but how? She sees from Goneril's speech and Lear's acceptance of it what it is he wants, and she would provide it if she could. But to pretend publicly to love, where you do not love, is easy; to pretend to love, where you really do love, is not obviously possible. She hits on the first solution to her dilemma: Love, and be silent. That is, love *by being* silent. That will do what he seems to want, it will avoid the expression of love, keep it secret. She is his joy; she knows it and he knows it. Surely that is enough? Then Regan speaks, and following that Cordelia's second utterance, again aside:



Then poor Cordelia!  
 And yet not so; since I am sure my love's  
 More ponderous than my tongue.

(*I, i, 76-78*)

Presumably, in line with the idea of a defiant Cordelia, this is to be interpreted as a re-affirmation of her decision not to speak. But again, it needn't be. After Lear's acceptance of Regan's characteristic outstripping (she has no ideas of her own, her special vileness is always to increase the measure of pain others are prepared to inflict; her mind is itself a lynch mob) Cordelia may realize that she will *have* to say something. "More ponderous than my tongue" suggests that she is going to move it, not that it is immovable—which would make it more ponderous than her love. And this produces her second groping for an exit from the dilemma: to speak, but making her love seem less than it is, out of love. Her tongue will move, and obediently, but against her condition—then poor Cordelia, making light of her love. And yet *she* knows the truth. Surely that is enough?

But when the moment comes, she is speechless: "Nothing my lord." I do not deny that this can be read defiantly, as can the following "You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me" speech. She is outraged, violated, confused, so young; Lear is torturing her, claiming her devotion, which she wants to give, but forcing her to help him betray (or not to betray) it, to falsify it publicly. (Lear's ambiguity here, wanting at once to open and to close her mouth, further shows the ordinariness of the scene, its verisimilitude to common parental love, swinging between absorption and rejection of its offspring, between encouragement to a rebellion they failed to make, and punishment for it.) It may be that with Lear's active violation, she snaps; her resentment provides her with words, and she levels her abdication of love at her traitorous, shameless father:

Happily, when I shall wed,  
 That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry  
 Half my love with him . . . .

(*I, i, 100-102*)

The trouble is, the words are too calm, too cold for the kind of sharp rage and hatred real love can produce. She is never in possession of

her situation, "her voice was ever soft, gentle and low" (*V*, iii, 272-273), she is young, and "least" (*I*, i, 83). (This notation of her stature and of the quality of her voice is unique in the play. The idea of a defiant *small* girl seems grotesque, as an idea of Cordelia.) All her words are words of love; to love is all she knows how to do. That is her problem, and at the cause of the tragedy of King Lear.

I imagine the scene this way: the older daughters' speeches are public, set; they should not be said to Lear, but to the court, sparing themselves his eyes and him theirs. They are not monsters first, but ladies. He is content. Then Cordelia says to him, away from the court, in confused appeal to their accustomed intimacy, "Nothing"—don't force me, I don't know what you want, there is nothing I can say, to speak what you want I must not speak. But he is alarmed at the appeal and tries to cover it up, keeping up the front, and says, speaking to her and to the court, as if the ceremony is still in full effect: "Nothing will come of nothing; speak again." (*Hysterica passio* is already stirring.) Again she says to him: "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth"—not the heart which loves him, that always has been present in her voice; but the heart which is shuddering with confusion, with wanting to do the impossible, the heart which is now in her throat. But to no avail. Then the next line would be her first attempt to obey him by speaking publicly: "I love your Majesty according to my bond; no more no less"—not stinting, not telling *him* the truth (what is the true *amount* of love this loving young girl knows to measure with her bond?), not refusing him, but still trying to conceal her love, to lighten its full measure. Then her father's brutally public, and perhaps still publicly considerate, "How, how, Cordelia! Mend your speech a little, lest you may mar your fortunes." So she tries again to divide her kingdom (" . . . that lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry half my love with him . . ."). Why should she wish to shame him publicly? He has shamed himself and everyone knows it. She is trying to conceal him; and to do that she cuts herself in two. (In the end, he faces what she has done here: "Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia. . . ." Lear cannot, at that late moment, be thinking of prison as a sacrifice. I imagine him there partly remembering this first scene, and the first of Cordelia's sacrifices—of love to convention.)

After this speech, said in suppression, confusion, abandonment, she is shattered, by her failure and by Lear's viciousness to her. Her

sisters speak again only when they are left alone, to plan. Cordelia revives and speaks after France enters and has begun to speak for her:

Sure, her offence  
Must be of such unnatural degree  
That monsters it, or your fore-vouch'd affection  
Fall into taint; which to believe of her,  
Must be a faith that reason without miracle  
Should never plant in me.

(I, i, 218-223)

France's love shows him the truth. Tainted love is the answer, love dyed—not decayed or corrupted exactly; Lear's love is still alive, but expressed as, colored over with, hate. Cordelia finds her voice again, protected in France's love, and she uses it to change the subject, still protecting Lear from discovery.

A reflection of what Cordelia now must feel is given by one's rush of gratitude toward France, one's almost wild relief as he speaks his beautiful trust. She does not ask her father to relent, but only to give France some explanation. Not the right explanation: What has "that glib and oily art" got to do with it? That is what her sisters needed, because their task was easy: to dissemble. Convention perfectly suits these ladies. But she lets it go at that—he hates me because I would not flatter him. The truth is, she *could* not flatter; not because she was too proud or too principled, though these might have been the reasons, for a different character; but because nothing she could have done would have *been* flattery—at best it would have been *dissembled flattery*. There is no convention for doing what Cordelia was asked to do. It is not that Goneril and Regan have taken the words out of her mouth, but that here she cannot say them, because for her they are true ("Dearer than eye-sight, space and liberty . . ."). She is not disgusted by her sister's flattery (it's nothing new); but heart-broken at hearing the words she wishes she were in a position to say. So she is sent, and taken, away. Or half of her leaves; the other half remains, in Lear's mind, in Kent's service, and in the Fool's love.

(I spoke just now of "one's" gratitude and relief toward France. I was remembering my feeling at a production given by students at Berkeley during 1946 in which France—a small part, singled out by Granville-Barker as particularly requiring an actor of authority

and distinction—was given his full sensitivity and manliness, a combination notably otherwise absent from the play, as mature womanliness is. The validity of such feelings as touchstones of the accuracy of a reading of the play, and which feelings one is to trust and which not, ought to be discussed problems of criticism.)



It may be felt that I have forced this scene too far in order to fit it to my reading, that too many directions have to be provided to its acting in order to keep the motivation smooth. Certainly I have gone into more detail of this kind here than elsewhere, and I should perhaps say why. It is, first of all, the scene in which the problem of performance, or the performability, of this play comes to a head, or to its first head. Moreover, various interpretations offered of this scene are direct functions of attempts to *visualize* its progress; as though a critic's conviction about the greatness or weakness of the scene is a direct function of the success or unsuccess with which he has been able to imagine it concretely. Critics will invariably dwell on the motivations of Lear and Cordelia in this scene as a problem, even while taking their motivation later either as more or less obvious or for some other reason wanting no special description; and in particular, the motives or traits of character attributed to them here will typically be ones which have an immediate visual implication, ones in which, as it were, a psychological trait and its physical expression most nearly coalesce: at random, Lear is described as irascible (Schüking), arrogant, choleric, overbearing (Schlegel), Cordelia as shy, reluctant (Schüking), sullen, prideful (Coleridge), obstinate (Muir). This impulse seems to me correct, and honest: it is one thing to say that Cordelia's behavior in the opening scene is not inconsistent with her behavior when she reappears, but another to *show* its consistency. This is what I have wanted to test in visualizing her behavior in that scene. But it is merely a test, it proves nothing about my reading, except its actability; or rather, a performance on these lines would, or would not, prove that. And that is a further problem of aesthetics—to chart the relations between a text (or score), an analysis or interpretation of it, and a performance in terms of that analysis or interpretation.

The problem is not, as it is often put, that no performance is ideal, because this suggests we have some clear idea of what an ideal

performance would be, perhaps an idea of it as embodying all true interpretations, every resonance of the text struck under analysis. But this is no more possible, or comprehensible, than an experiment which is to verify every implication of a theory. (Then what makes a theory convincing?) Performances are actions, and the imitations of actions. As with any action, a performance cannot contain the totality of a human life—though one action can have a particularly summary or revelatory quality, and another will occur at a crossroads, and another will spin tangentially to the life and circumstances which call it out, or rub irrelevantly or mechanically against another. Some have no meaning for us at all, others have more resonance than they can express—as a resultant force answers to forces not visible in the one direction it selects. (Then what makes action bearable, or comprehensible?) I cannot at will give my past expression, though every gesture expresses it, and each elation and headache; my character is its epitome, as if the present were a pantomime of ghostly selections. What is necessary to a performance is what is necessary to action in the present, that it have its autonomy, and that it be in character, or out, and that it have a specific context and motive. Even if everything I have said about Cordelia is true, it needn't be registered explicitly in the way that first scene is played—there may, for example, be merit in stylizing it drastically. Only there will be no effort to present us with a sullen or prideful or defiant girl who reappears, with nothing intervening to change her, as the purest arch of love.

Nor, of course, has my rendering of the first scene been meant to bring out all the motivations or forces which cross there. For example, it might be argued that part of Lear's strategy is exactly to put Cordelia into the position of being denied her dowry, so that he will not lose her in marriage; if so, it half worked, and required the unanimity of France to turn it aside. Again, nothing has been said of the theme of politics which begins here and pervades the action. Not just the familiar Shakespearean theme which opens the interplay between the public and private lives of the public creature, but the particularity of the theme in this play, which is about the interpenetration and confusion of politics with love; something which, in modern societies, is equally the fate of private creatures—whether in the form of divided loyalties, or of one's relation to the State, or, more pervasively, in the new forms love and patriotism themselves take: love wielding itself in gestures of power, power extending itself

with claims of love. *Phèdre* is perhaps the greatest play concentrated to this theme of the body politic, and of the body, torn by the privacy of love; as it is closest to *King Lear* in its knowledge of shame as the experience of unacceptable love. And Machiavelli's knowledge of the world is present; not just in his attitudes of realism and cynicism, but in his experience of the condition to which these attitudes are appropriate—in which the inner and outer worlds have become totally disconnected, and man's life is all public, among strangers, seen only from outside. Luther saw the same thing at the same time, but from inside. For some, like Edmund, this is liberating knowledge, lending capacity for action. It is what Lear wants to abdicate from. For what Lear is doing in that first scene is trading power for love (pure power for mixed love); this is what his opening speech explicitly says. He imagines that this will prevent future strife now; but he is being counselled by his impotence, which is not the result of his bad decision, but produces it: he feels powerless to *appoint* his successor, recognized as the ultimate test of authority. The consequence is that politics becomes private, and so vanishes, with power left to serve hatred.



The final scene opens with Lear and Cordelia repeating or completing their actions in their opening scene; again Lear abdicates, and again Cordelia loves and is silent. Its readers have for centuries wanted to find consolation in this end: heavy opinion sanctioned Tate's Hollywood ending throughout the eighteenth century, which resurrects Cordelia; and in our time, scorning such vulgarity, the same impulse fastidiously digs itself deeper and produces redemption for Lear in Cordelia's figuring of transcendent love. But Dr. Johnson is surely right, more honest and more responsive: Cordelia's death is so shocking that we would avoid it if we could—if we have responded to it. And so the question, since her death is restored to us, is forced upon us: Why does she die? And this is not answered by asking, What does her death mean? (cp: Christ died to save sinners); but by answering, What killed her? (cp: Christ was killed by us, because his news was unendurable).

Lear's opening speech of this final scene is not the correction but the repetition of his strategy in the first scene, or a new tactic designed to win the old game; and it is equally disastrous.

CORD. Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?

LEAR. No, no, no, no! . . .

(*V, iii, 7-8*)

He cannot finally face the thing he has done; and this means what it always does, that he cannot bear being seen. He is anxious to go off to prison, with Cordelia; his love now is in the open—that much circumstance has done for him; but it remains imperative that it be confined, out of sight. (Neither Lear nor Cordelia, presumably, knows that the soldier in command is Gloucester's son; they feel unknown.) He is still ashamed, and the fantasy expressed in this speech ("We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage") is the same fantasy he brings on the stage with him in the first scene, the thwarting of which causes his maddened destructiveness. There Cordelia had offered him the marriage pledge ("Obey you, love you, and most honor you"), and she has shared his fantasy fully enough to wish to heal political strife with a kiss (or perhaps it is just the commonest fantasy of women):

CORD.

Restoration hang

Thy medicine on my lips. . . .

(*IV, vii, 26-27*)

(But after such abdication, what restoration? The next time we hear the words "hang" and "medicine," they announce death.) This gesture is as fabulous as anything in the opening scene. Now, at the end, Lear returns her pledge with his lover's song, his invitation to voyage (" . . . so we'll live, and pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh . . ."). The fantasy of this speech is as full of detail as a day dream, and it is clearly a happy dream for Lear. He has found at the end a way to have what he has wanted from the beginning. His tone is not: we will love *even though* we are in prison; but: because we are hidden together we can love. He has come to accept his love, not by making room in the world for it, but by denying its relevance to the world. He does not renounce the world in going to prison, but flees from it, to earthly pleasure. The astonishing image of "God's spies" (*V, iii, 17*) stays beyond me, but in part it contains the final emphasis upon looking without being seen; and it cites an intimacy which requires no reciprocity with real men. Like Gloucester-

ter toward Dover, Lear anticipates God's call. He is not experiencing reconciliation with a daughter, but partnership in a mystic marriage.

If so, it cannot be, as is often suggested, that when he says

Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,  
The Gods themselves throw incense.

(*V, iii, 20-21*)

he is thinking simply of going to prison with Cordelia as a sacrifice. It seems rather that, the lines coming immediately after his love song, it is their love itself which has the meaning of sacrifice. As though the ideas of love and of death are interlocked in his mind—and in particular of death as a payment or placation for the granting of love. His own death, because acknowledging love still presents itself to him as an annihilation of himself. And her death, because now that he admits her love, he must admit, what he knew from the beginning, that he is impotent to sustain it. This is the other of Cordelia's sacrifices—of love to secrecy.

Edmund's death reinforces the juncture of these ideas, for it is death which releases his capacity for love. It is this release which permits his final act:

. . . some good I mean to do  
Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send . . .

(*V, iii, 243-244*)

What has released him? Partly, of course, the presence of his own death; but that in itself need not have worked this way. Primarily it is the fact that all who have loved him, or claimed love for him, are dead. He has eagerly prompted Edgar to tell the tale of their father's death; his reaction upon hearing of Goneril's and Regan's deaths is as to a solution to impossible, or illegitimate, love: "All three now marry in an instant"; and his immediate reaction upon seeing their dead bodies is: "Yet Edmund was belov'd." *That* is what he wanted to know, and he can acknowledge it now, when it cannot be returned, now that its claim is dead. In his following speech he means well for the first time.



It can be said that what Lear is ashamed of is not his need for love and his inability to return it, but of the *nature* of his love for Cordelia. It is too far from plain love of father for daughter. Even if we resist seeing in it the love of lovers, it is at least incompatible with the idea of her having any (other) lover. There is a moment, beyond the words, when this comes to the surface of the action. It is the moment Lear is waking from his madness, no longer incapable of seeing the world, but still not strong enough to protect his thoughts: "Methinks I should know you and know this man . . ." (*IV, vii, 64*). I take it "this man" is generally felt to refer to Kent (disguised as Caius), for there is clearly no reason to suppose Lear knows the Doctor, the only other man present. Certainly this is plausible; but in fact Lear never does acknowledge Kent, as he does his child Cordelia.<sup>9</sup> And after this recognition he goes on to ask, "Am I in France?" This question irresistibly (to me) suggests that the man he thinks he should know is the man he expects to be with his daughter, her husband. This would be unmistakable if he directs his "this man" to the Doctor, taking him for, but not able to make him out as,

<sup>9</sup> Professor Jonas Barish—to whom I am indebted for other suggestions about this essay as well as the present one—has pointed out to me that in my eagerness to solve all the *King Lear* problems I have neglected trying an account of Kent's plan in delaying making himself known ("Yet to be known shortens my made intent" (*IV, vii, 9*)). This omission is particularly important because Kent's is the one delay that causes no harm to others, hence it provides an internal measure of those harms. I do not understand his "dear cause" (*IV, iii, 52*), but I think the specialness of Kent's delay has to do with these facts: (1) It never prevents his perfect faithfulness to his duties of service; these do not require—Kent does not permit them to require—personal recognition in order to be performed. This sense of the finitude of the demands placed upon Kent, hence of the harm and of the good he can perform, is a function of his complete absorption into his social office, in turn a function of his being the only principal character in the play (apart from the Fool) who does not appear as the member of a *family*. (2) He does not delay revealing himself to Cordelia, only (presumably) to Lear. A reason for that would be that since the King has banished him it is up to the King to reinstate him; he will not presume on his old rank. (3) If his plan goes beyond finding some way, or just waiting, for Lear to recognize him first (not out of pride but out of right) then perhaps it is made irrelevant by finding Lear again only in his terminal state, or perhaps it always consisted only in doing what he tries to do there, find an opportunity to tell Lear about Caius and ask for pardon. It may be wondered that we do not feel Lear's fragmentary recognitions of Kent to leave something undone, nor Kent's hopeless attempts to hold Lear's attention to be crude intrusions, but rather to amplify a sadness already amplified past sensing. This may be accounted for partly by Kent's pure expression of the special poignance of the servant's office, requiring a life centered in another life, exhausted in loyalty and in silent witnessing (a silence Kent broke and Lear must mend); partly by the fact that Cordelia has fully recognized him: "To be acknowledg'd, Madam, is o'er-paid" (*IV, vii, 4*); partly by the fact that when his master Lear is dead, it is his master who calls him, and his last words are those of obedience.

France. He finds out it is not, and the next time we see him he is pressing off to prison with his child, and there is no further thought of her husband. It is a standing complaint that Shakespeare's explanation of France's absence is perfunctory. It is more puzzling that Lear himself never refers to him, not even when he is depriving him of her forever. Either France has ceased to exist for Lear, or it is importantly from him that he wishes to reach the shelter of prison.

I do not wish to suggest that "avoidance of love" and "avoidance of a particular kind of love" are alternative hypotheses about this play. On the contrary, they seem to me to interpret one another. Avoidance of love is always, or always begins as, an avoidance of a particular kind of love: men do not just naturally not love, they learn not to. And our lives begin by having to accept under the name of love whatever closeness is offered, and by then having to forgo its object. And the avoidance of a particular love, or the acceptance of it, will spread to every other; every love, in acceptance or rejection, is mirrored in every other. It is part of the miracle of the vision in *King Lear* to bring this before us, so that we do not care whether the *kind* of love felt between these two is forbidden according to man's lights. We care whether love is or is not altogether forbidden to man, whether we may not altogether be incapable of it, of admitting it into our world. We wonder whether we may always go mad between the equal efforts and terrors at once of rejecting and of accepting love. The soul torn between them, the body feels torn (producing a set of images accepted since Caroline Spurgeon's *Shakespeare's Imagery* as central to *King Lear*), and the solution to this insoluble condition is to wish for the tearing apart of the world.

Lear wishes to escape into prison for another old reason—because he is unwilling to be seen to weep.

The good years shall devour them, flesh and fell,  
 Ere they shall make us weep: we'll see 'em starved first.  
 (V, iii, 24-25)

See them shalt thou never. And in the end he still avoids Cordelia. He sees that she is weeping after his love song ("Wipe thine eyes"). But why is she in tears? Why does Lear think she is? Lear imagines that she is crying for the reasons that he is on the verge of tears—the

old reasons, the sense of impotence, shame, loss. But *her* reasons for tears do not occur to him, that she sees him as he is, as he was, that he is unable to take his last chance; that he, at the farthest edge of life, must again sacrifice her, again abdicate his responsibilities; and that he cannot know what he asks. And yet, seeing that, it is for him that she is cast down. Upon such knowledge the Gods themselves throw incense.

It is as though her response here is her knowledge of the end of the play; she alone has the capacity of compassion Lear will need when we next see him, with Cordelia dead in his arms: "Howl, howl, howl! O! you are men of stones." (Cp. the line and a half Dante gives to Ugolino, facing his doomed sons, a fragment shored by Arnold: "I did not weep, I so turned to stone within. They wept. . . .") Again he begins to speak by turning on those at hand: "A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all!" But then the tremendous knowledge is released: "I might have saved her. . . ." From the beginning, and through each moment until they are led to prison, he might have saved her, had he done what every love requires, put himself aside long enough to see through to her, and be seen through. I do not mean that it is clear that he could, at the end, have done what Edmund feared (" . . . pluck the common bosom on his side, And turn our impress'd lances in our eyes . . ."); but it is not clear that he could not. And even if he had not succeeded, her death would not be on his hands. In his last speech, "No, no, no, no" becomes "No, no, no life!" His need, or his interpretation of his need, becomes her sentence. This is what is unbearable. Or bearable only out of the capacity of Cordelia. If we are to weep her fortunes we must take her eyes.



Is this a Christian play? The question is very equivocal. When it is answered affirmatively, Cordelia is viewed as a Christ figure whose love redeems nature and transfigures Lear. So far as this is intelligible to me, I find it false both to the experience of the play and to the fact that it *is* a play. *King Lear* is not illustrated theology (anyway, which theology is thought to be illustrated, what understanding of atonement, redemption, etc., is thought to be figured?), and nature and Lear are not touched, but run out. If Cordelia exemplifies Christ,

it is at the moment of Crucifixion, not Resurrection. But the moment of his death is the moment that Christ resembles us, finally takes the human condition fully into himself. (This is why every figure reaching the absolute point of rejection starts becoming a figure of Christ. And perhaps why it is so important to the Christ story that it begins with birth and infancy.) It is in his *acceptance* of this condition that we are to resemble him. If Cordelia resembles Christ, it is by having become fully human, by knowing her separateness, by knowing the deafness of miracles, by accepting the unacceptability of her love, and by nevertheless maintaining her love and the whole knowledge it brings. One can say she "redeems nature" (*IV, vi, 207*), but this means nothing miraculous, only that she shows nature not to be the cause of evil—there is no cause in nature which makes these hard hearts, and no cause outside either. The cause is the heart itself, the having of a heart, in a world made heartless. Lear is the cause. Murderers, traitors *all*.

Another way, the play can be said to be Christian—not because it shows us redemption—it does not; but because it throws our redemption into *question*, and leaves it up to us. But there is no suggestion that we can take it up only through Christ. On the contrary, there is reason to take this drama as an alternative to the Christian one. In the first place, Christianity, like every other vision of the play, is not opted for, but tested. Specifically, as was said earlier, in Edgar's conduct; more generally, in its suggestion that all appeals to Gods are distractions or excuses, because the imagination uses them to wish for complete, for final solutions, when what is needed is at hand, or nowhere. But isn't this what Christ meant? And isn't this what Lear fails to see in wishing to be God's spy before he is God's subject? Cordelia is further proof of this: her grace is shown by the absence in her of any unearthly experiences; she is the only good character whose attention is wholly on earth, on the person nearest her. It is during the storm that Lear's mind clouds most and floods with philosophy; when it clears, Cordelia is present.

These considerations take us back to the set of ideas which see Lear as having arrived, in the course of the storm, at the naked human condition—as if the storm was the granting of his prayer to "feel what wretches feel." It may seem that I have denied this in underlining Lear's cruelty to Gloucester and in placing him at the cause of Cordelia's death, because it may feel as if I am blaming Lear

for his behavior here.<sup>10</sup> And what room is there for blame? Is he to blame for being human? For being subject to a cosmic anxiety and to fantasies which enclose him from perfect compassion? Certainly blame is inappropriate, for certainly I do not claim to know what *else* Lear might do. And yet I cannot deny that my pain at Lear's actions is not overcome by my knowledge of his own suffering. I might describe my experience of him here as one of unplaceable blame, blame no one can be asked to bear and no one is in a position to level—like blaming heaven. That does not seem to me inappropriate as an experience of tragedy, of what it is for which tragedy provides catharsis. (Neither Kent nor Cordelia requires tragedy for purification, the one preceding the other transcending personal morality.) What I am denying is that to say Lear becomes simply a man is to say that he achieves the unaccommodated human condition. The ambiguities here stand out in Empson's suggestion of Lear as scapegoat and outcast.<sup>11</sup> This cannot be wrong, but it can be made too much of, or the wrong thing. We do not want the extremity of Lear's suffering to have gone for nothing, or for too little, so we may imagine that it has made him capable of envisioning ours. But as the storm is ending he is merely humanly a scapegoat, as any man is on the wrong end of injustice; and no more an outcast than any man out of favor. Only at his finish does his suffering measure the worst that can happen to a man, and there not because he is a scapegoat

<sup>10</sup> In a detailed and very useful set of comments on an earlier draft of this essay, Professor Alpers mentions this as a possible response to what I had written; and it was his suggestion of Empson's appeal to the scapegoat idea as offering a truer response to Lear's condition which sent me back to Empson's essay. It was as an effort to do justice to Alpers' reaction that I have included the ensuing discussion of scapegoats in *King Lear*. Beyond this, I have altered or expanded several other passages in the light of his comments, for all of which I am grateful.

<sup>11</sup> "Fool in Lear," in *The Structure of Complex Words* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1967, Ann Arbor Paperback), pp. 145, 157. Because of Empson's espousal of it, Orwell's essay on Lear may be mentioned here ("Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool," reprinted from *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays* in F. Kermode, ed., *Four Centuries of Shakespearean Criticism* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), pp. 514-31). It is, perhaps, of the nature of Orwell's piece that one finds oneself remembering the feel of its moral passion and honesty and the clarity of its hold on the idea of *renunciation* as the subject of the play, without being able oneself to produce Orwell's, or one's own, evidence for the idea in the play—except that the meaning of the entire opening and the sense of its consequences, assume, as it were, a self-evidence within the light of that idea. It is probably as good a notation of the subject as one word could give, and Orwell's writing, here as elsewhere, is exemplary of a correct way in which the moral sensibility, distrusting higher ambitions, exercises its right to judge an imperfect world, never exempting itself from that world.

but because he has made a scapegoat of his love. But that Cordelia is Lear's scapegoat is compatible with Lear's being ours. And seeing him as a scapegoat is not incompatible with seeing him as avoiding love—on the contrary, it is this which shows what his connection with us is, the act for which he bears total, sacrificial consequences. If this play contains scapegoats, it is also about scapegoats, about what it is which creates scapegoats and about the cost of creating them. To insist upon Lear as scapegoat is apt to thin our sense of this general condition in his world; and this again would put us in his position—not *seeing* it from his point of view (maintaining ours), but accepting his point of view, hence denying the other characters, and using the occasion not to feel for him (and them) but to sympathize with ourselves.

All the good characters are exiled, cast out—Cordelia and Kent initially, Edgar at the beginning and Lear at the end of Act II, Gloucester at the end of Act III. But there is from the opening lines a literal social outcast of another kind, the Bastard, the central evil character. A play which has the power of transforming Kings into Fools equally has the power of overlapping Kings and Bastards—the naked human condition is more than any man bargains for. Empson finds Lear's "most distinct expression of the scapegoat idea" in the lines

None does offend, none; I say none. I'll able 'em:  
Take that of me, my friend, who have the power  
To seal the accuser's lips.

(*IV, vi, 170-172*)

Empson reads: "The royal prerogative has become the power of the outcast to deal directly on behalf of mankind . . ." I do not question the presence of this feeling, but it is equivocal. For what is the nature of this new, direct power of sealing lips? The problem is not just that "None does offend, none; I say none . . ." protests too much, as though Lear can't quite believe it. The problem is that Edmund also deals with men to seal their lips, and he can directly, even elatedly, use this human power because he is an outcast, because judgment has *already* been passed upon him. That is the justice of his position. And he could express himself in the words "None does offend . . ." He would mean, as in his second soliloquy (*I, ii, 124-*

140), that all are equally evil and evasive, hence no man is in a position from which to judge offense in others.

What would this prove, except that the Devil can quote scripture? But that is proof enough if it proves that the greatest truths are nothing, mean harm or help or nothing, apart from their application in the individual case. We see (do we see?) how Edmund's meaning repudiates the Gospels: he is not speaking on behalf of mankind, but on his own; and he is not forgoing judgment, but escaping it by making it indiscriminate, cynicizing it. Then do we see how Lear's mind, in its rage at injustice, is different from Edmund's? For Lear too has a private use for this indiscriminate condemnation of the world. Suppose we see in the progress of Lear's madness a recapitulation of the history of civilization or of consciousness: from the breaking up of familial bonds and the release of offenses which destroy the social cosmos (*III, iv*), through the fragile replacement of revenge by the institution of legal justice (*III, vi*), to the corruption of justice itself and the breaking up of civil bonds (*IV, vi*). In raging with each of these stages in turn, Lear's mind gusts to a calm as the storm calms, drawing even with the world as it goes. (This is why, adapting Empson's beautiful and compassionate perception, Lear at this point removes his boots, at home again in the world.) If he is an outcast, every man is, whose society is in rags about him; if he is a scapegoat, every man is, under the general shiftings of blame and in the inaccuracy of justice. Lear has not arrived at the human condition he saw imaged in poor naked Tom (the sight which tipped him from world-destroying rage into world-creating madness); but one could say he now has this choice open to him. He finds himself a man; so far he has abdicated. But he has not yet chosen his mortality, to be one man among others; so far he is not at one, atonement is not complete. He has come to terms with Goneril and Regan, with filial ingratitude; he has come back from the way he *knew* madness lies. But he has not come to terms with parental insatiability (which he denounced in his "barbarous Scythian" speech (*I, i, 116*), and which Gloucester renounces in "the food of thy abused father's wrath" (*IV, i, 22*)). He has not come back to Cordelia. And he does not.

Evidence for this in this scene is not solely that his "None does offend" is said still stranded in madness (nor even in the possible hint of power in the fact that he does not just take off his boots but

imagines them removed for him, as by a servant) but in the content of his ensuing sermon ("I will preach to thee"):

When we are born, we cry that we are come  
To this great stage of fools.

(*IV, vi, 184-185*)

This is a sermon, presumably, because it interprets the well-known text of tears with which each human life begins. But, as Empson puts it, "the babies cannot be supposed to know all this about human affairs." I think Lear is there feeling like a child, after the rebirth of his senses (children do naturally "wawl and cry" at injustice); and feeling that the world is an unnatural habitat for man; and feeling it is unnatural because it is a stage. Perhaps it is a stage because its actors are seen by heaven, perhaps because they are seen by one another. Either way, it is Lear (not, for example Gloucester, Lear's congregation) who sees it there as a stage. But why a stage of fools? There will be as many answers as there are meanings of "fool." But the point around which all the answers will turn is that it is when, and because, he sees the world as a stage that he sees it peopled with fools, with distortions of men, with natural scapegoats, among whom human relationship does not arise. Then who is in a position to level this vision at the world? Not, of course, that it is invalid—no one could deny it. The catch is that there is no one to assert it—without asserting himself a fool. The world-accusing Fool, like the world-accusing Liar, suffers a Paradox. Which is why "the praise of Folly" must mean "Folly's praise." (To say that the theatricalization of others turns them to scapegoats is a way of putting the central idea of Part II of this essay.)

But if the sense in which, or way in which, Lear has become a scapegoat is not special about him, he can be said to be special there in his *feeling* that he is a scapegoat and in his universal casting of the world with scapegoats. This is an essential connection between him and Gloucester's family: Gloucester is in fact turned out of society, and while he is not left feeling that society has made a scapegoat of him, he has made scapegoats of his sons, deprived each of his birth-right, the one by nature and custom, the other by decree. Each reciprocates by casting his father out, in each case by a stratagem, though the one apparently acts out of hatred, the other apparently



out of love; and each of the brothers makes a scapegoat of the other, the one by nature and custom, the other by design. Like Edgar, Lear casts himself in the role of scapegoat, and then others suffer for it; like Edmund, he finds himself the natural fool of Fortune, a customary scapegoat, and then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill (cf. *IV*, *vi*, 189)—the mind clawing at itself for a hold. These nests of doublings (and in no play is Shakespeare's familiar doubling of themes so relentless, becoming something like the medium of the drama itself, or its vision of the world) suggest that the dramatic point of Shakespeare's doublings is not so much to amplify or universalize a theme as to focus or individuate it, and in particular to show the freedom under each character's possession of his character. Each way of responding to one's foolishness is tested by every other; each way of accepting one's having been cast out is tested by every other; that Gloucester is not driven mad by filial ingratitude (though he is no stranger to the possibility: his very openness in looking at it ("I'll tell thee, friend, I am almost mad myself" (*III*, *iv*, 169-170) makes him a sensitive touchstone of normalcy in this) means that there is no necessary route Lear's spirit has followed. One will want to object that from the fact that a route is not necessary to Gloucester it does not follow that it is not necessary to Lear. But that is the point. To find out why it is necessary one has to discover who Lear is, what *he* finds necessary, his specific spins of need and choice. His tragedy is that he has to find out too, and that he cannot rest with less than an answer. "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (*I*, *iv*, 238). At the first rebuff in his new condition, Lear is forced to the old tragic question. And the Fool lets out his astonishing knowledge: "Lear's shadow." At this point Lear either does not hear, or he thinks the Fool has *told* him who he is, and takes it, as it seems easy to take it, to mean roughly that he is in reduced circumstances. It would be somewhat harder to take if he heard the suggestion of *shade* under "shadow." But the truth may still be harder to be told, harder than anything that can just be told.

Suppose the Fool has precisely answered Lear's question, which is only characteristic of him. Then his reply means: Lear's shadow can tell you who you are. If this is heard, it will mean that the answer to Lear's question is held in the inescapable Lear which is now obscure and obscuring, and in the inescapable Lear which is projected upon the world, and that Lear is double and has a double. And then

this play reflects another long curve of feeling about doubling, describing an emphasis other than my recent suggestion that it haunts the characters with their freedom. In the present guise it taunts the characters with their lack of wholeness, their separation from themselves, by loss or denial or opposition. (In Montaigne: "We are, I know not how, double in ourselves, so that what we believe we disbelieve, and cannot rid ourselves of what we condemn."<sup>12</sup> By the time of Heine's *Doppelgänger* ("Still ist die Nacht . . ."), the self is split from its past and from its own feeling, however intimately present both may be.) But in either way, either by putting freedom or by putting integrity into question, doubling sets a task, of discovery, of acknowledgment. And both ways are supported in the moment Lear faces Gloucester and confuses identities with him.

If on a given experience of the play one is caught by the reference to adultery and then to "Gloucester's bastard son" which launch Lear's long tirade against the foulness of nature and of man's justice, one may find that absent member of the Gloucester family presiding over Lear's mind here. For Lear's disgust with sexual nature is not far from Edmund's early manic praise of it, especially in their joint sense of the world as alive in its pursuit; and Edmund's stinging sensitivity to the illegitimacy of society's "legitimacy" prefigures Lear's knowledge of the injustice of society's "justice." If, therefore, we are to see in this play, in Miss Welsford's fine phrase, the investing of the King with motley, then in this scene we may see the King standing up for bastards—an illegitimate King in an unlawful world. (Edmund had tossed off a prayer for bastards, and perhaps there is a suggestion that the problem with prayers is not that few are answered but that *all* are, one way or another.) As the doublings reflect one another, each character projecting some more or less eccentric angle to a common theme, one glimpses the possibility of a common human nature which each, in his own way, fails to achieve; or perhaps glimpses the idea that its gradual achievement is the admission of reflection in oneself of every theme a man exhibits. As Christ receives reflection in every form of human scapegoat, every way in which one man bears the brunt of another's distortion and rejection. For us the reflection is brightest in Cordelia, because of her acceptance, perhaps because she

<sup>12</sup> Auden uses this as the epigraph to *The Double Man*; I have not yet found its context.

is hanged; it is present, on familiar grounds, in the mysteries of the Fool. I cannot help feeling it, if grossly, in the figure of the Bastard son. I do not press this. Yet it makes us reflect that evil is not wrong when it thinks of itself as good, for at those times it recaptures a craving for goodness, an experience of its own innocence which the world rejects.



There is hope in this play, and it is not in heaven. It lies in the significance of its two most hideous moments: Gloucester's blinding and Cordelia's death. In Gloucester's history we found hope, because while his weakness has left him open to the uses of evil, evil *has* to turn upon him because it cannot bear him to witness. As long as that is true, evil does not have *free* sway over the world. In Cordelia's death there is hope, because it shows the Gods more just—more than we had hoped or wished: Lear's prayer is answered again in this. The Gods are, in Edgar's wonderful idea, clear. Cordelia's death means that *every* falsehood, every refusal of acknowledgment, will be tracked down. In the realm of the spirit, Kierkegaard says, there is absolute justice. Fortunately, because if all we had to go on were the way the world goes, we would lose the concept of justice altogether; and then human life would become unbearable. Kant banked the immortality of the soul on the fact that in *this* world goodness and happiness are unaligned—a condition which, if never righted, is incompatible with moral sanity, and hence with the existence of God. But immortality is not necessary for the soul's satisfaction. What is necessary is its own coherence, its ability to judge a world in which evil is successful and the good are doomed; and in particular its knowledge that while injustice may flourish, it cannot rest content. This, I take it, is what Plato's *Republic* is about. And it is an old theme of tragedy.

Its companion theme is that our actions have consequences which outrun our best, and worst, intentions. The drama of *King Lear* not merely embodies this theme, it comments on it, even deepens it. For what it shows is that the *reason* consequences furiously hunt us down is not merely that we are half-blind, and unfortunate, but that we go on doing the thing which produced these consequences in the first place. What we need is not rebirth, or salvation, but the courage, or plain prudence, to see and to stop. To

abdicate. But what do we need in order to do that? It would be salvation.

## II

These last remarks come from a response not so much to the content of the play as to its form. It is a drama not about the given condition in which the soul finds itself (in relation to Gods or to earth) but about the soul, as Schopenhauer puts the vision of Kant, as the provider of the given, of the conditions under which Gods and earth can appear. It is an enactment not of fate but of responsibility, including the responsibility for fate. However this is finally to be put, its reception demands a particular kind of perception.

What I have in mind can best be brought out in the following way. Suppose that what I have said about why Gloucester is blinded, why he goes to Dover, why he tries suicide, why Edgar avoids his recognition, why he reveals himself when he does, what produces Edmund's attempt to undo his sentence upon Lear and Cordelia, why Gloucester is the first person Lear recognizes, why Cordelia weeps after Lear's imprisoned fantasy, etc. etc.—suppose my answers are true. The problem is then unavoidable: How can critics not have seen them? For it is not that the answers I take to be correct are *recherché*; one needn't have the learning of Bradley or Chambers, or the secrets of Empson, or the discrimination of Johnson, or the passion of Coleridge or Keats, to arrive at them. Their difficulty is of a different kind, an opposite kind.

It is the difficulty of seeing the obvious, something which for some reason is always underestimated, habitually perhaps but not solely by critics, even when the art which hosts them is devoted to that seeing, and the artist set against that underestimation. What *seems* obvious is traced out by the invisible powers of fashion, which offers us reasons whose convenience is almost irresistible. (If this is something we know, it is also something we equally underestimate.) The examples which emerge as most pressing are these: When the well-made play shows us what drama is we say that Shakespeare is poor at plotting, and since we know he is great we excuse him, and then we cross our minds and say that the defects will not be noticed in the heat of performance. When scruples and exercises of New

Criticism tell us what poems are, we say that Shakespeare's plays are poems and therefore structures of meaning, and in this way account for their densities, assuring ourselves that even if we do not or cannot perceive them in a given moment they nevertheless have their effect. When we are made to know that Shakespeare lived in Shakespeare's age and so dealt in his age's understandings and conventions, we can forget that it is Shakespeare demanding of us; and so *his* Bastard slumps back into "the" Bastard of his age, from which he had pointedly lifted it. In some cases (typically in the first kind of example) psychology is invoked to take up the moral or aesthetic slack, in other cases (typically in the last kind of example), and doubtless in response to its earlier misuse, psychology is said to be irrelevant. And in all cases the drama is missed, our perception of it blanked.

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I pause here to indicate why I am not trying unduly to blur the immodest or melodramatic quality of the claims I have made: that quality will itself be serviceable if it provides further data for investigating the act of criticism.<sup>13</sup> I am assuming, that is, that criticism is inherently immodest and melodramatic—not merely from its temptations to uninformative superiority and to presumptuous fellow feeling (with audience or artist) but from the logic of its claims, in particular from two of its elements: (1) A critical position will finally rest upon calling a claim *obvious*; (2) a critical discovery will present itself as the *whole* truth of a work, a provision of its total meaning. Taken in familiar ways, these claims seem easily disconfirmable. How can a claim be obvious if not everyone finds it obvious? (And there is always someone who does not—maybe the critic himself won't tomorrow.) And how can a claim to total meaning be correct when so much is left out? (And there is always something.) But if critical judgments are felt to be refuted on *such* grounds, they are not merely intolerant but a little idiotic. (That is the implied claim of such refutations. I don't say it is never justified.) But suppose we hold on to the intolerance and hold off the idiocy for a moment. Then we have to ask: How could serious men habitually make such *vulnerable*

<sup>13</sup> The facts of intolerance, expressed as part of an examination of their causes and reasons, particularly of the starkness of their appearance in the criticism of modern arts, is the content of Michael Fried's contribution to *Art Criticism in the Sixties* (New York: October House, Inc., 1967), four papers that comprised a symposium held at Brandeis University in May, 1966.

claims? (Meaning, perhaps, claims so *obviously* false?) But suppose there is another way of taking them; that is, suppose our familiar ways of taking them are what make them seem a bit simple. What are these ways? They take a claim to obviousness as a claim to certainty, and they take the claim to totality as a claim to exhaustiveness. The first of these ways is deeply implicated in the history of modern epistemology, and its effect has been to distrust conviction rather than to investigate the concept of the obvious. (Wittgenstein's later philosophy can be thought of as investigations of obviousness.) The second of these ways expresses the exclusiveness of a lived world, instanced by the mutual offense and the interminable and glancing criticisms of opposed philosophies, and its effect has been to distrust exclusiveness or to attempt exhaustiveness rather than to investigate the concept of totality. It is in the nature of both of these sources of intolerance to appear to be private; because in both one at best has nothing to go on but oneself. (A fashionable liberalism has difficulty telling the difference between seriousness and bigotry. A suggestion of the difference is that the bigot is never isolated. A more ambitious connoisseur will number the differences between seriousness and madness.) This is why a critical discovery is often accompanied by a peculiar exhilaration and why recognition of a critical lapse is accompanied by its peculiar chagrin. One will want to know how (and whether) these emotions differ from the general relish of victory and the general anguish at defeat—say, in science. I do not say that in every case there are differences, but I point to the different ways in which concepts such as “discovery,” “advance,” “talent,” “professional,” “insight,” “depth,” “competition,” “influence,” etc. are, or may be, applied in criticism and in science—the different shapes of the arenas in which victory and defeat are determined. It seems difference enough that one imagines a major scientific insight occurring to a man along with an impulse to race into the streets with it, out of relief and out of the happy knowledge that it is of relevance to his townsmen; whereas the joy in a major critical insight may be unshareable if one lacks the friends, and even not need to be spoken (while perhaps hoping that another will find it for himself). This must go with the fact that the topics of criticism are not objects but works, things which are *already* spoken. And if arrogance is inherent in criticism (and therefore where not in the Humanities?), then humility is no less painful a task there than anywhere else. Nor is it sur-

prising that the specific elements of arrogance afflict both criticism and philosophy: if philosophy can be thought of as the world of a particular culture brought to consciousness of itself, then one mode of criticism (call it philosophical criticism) can be thought of as the world of a particular work brought to consciousness of itself.



That the perceptions of an age are formed and disturbed by ghostly fashions is scarcely news. And the difficulties of maturing past them are not the difficulties I am primarily interested in here; they are not peculiar to our failure to confront such drama as *King Lear* unearths. This failure has to do with the mode of this drama itself. Indeed, if my reading of it is correct, the drama is exactly about this difficulty. The difficulty lies in a refusal, a refusal expressed as a failure to acknowledge. (That this is a refusal, something each character is *doing* and is going on doing, is what makes these events add up to tragedy rather than to melodrama—in which what you fail to see is simply something out of sight; or to a scene of natural catastrophe—in which what you fail to prevent is simply beyond prediction or reach.) But isn't this at most the difficulty of the characters in the play? What has this got to do with our difficulties in "appreciating this mode of drama," whatever that turns out to mean?

I have more than once suggested that in failing to see what the true position of a character is, in a given moment, we are exactly put in his condition, and thereby implicated in the tragedy. How? Obviously we are not, as Edgar is, standing in Gloucester's presence; we can neither delay nor not delay, avoid nor not avoid, revealing ourselves to him. If, therefore, my suggestion makes sense, there must be an answer to the question: *What* connects us with Edgar when we accept his conduct in the scenes with his father? What is the point or mechanism of this identification? And the answer to this question is the answer to the question: What is the medium of this drama, how does it do its work upon us? My reading of *King Lear* will have fully served its purpose if it provides data from which an unprejudicial description of its "work" can be composed. One such description would be this: The medium is one which keeps all significance continuously before our senses, so that when it comes over us that we have missed it, this discovery will reveal our ignorance to have been willful, complicitous, a refusal to see. This is a fact of my experience

in reading the play (it is not a fact of my experience in seeing the play, which may say something either about its performability or about the performances I have seen of it, or about the nature of performance generally). It is different from the experience of comprehending meanings in a complex poem or the experience of finding the sense of a lyric. These are associated with a thrill of recognition, an access of intimacy, not with a particular sense of exposure. The progress from ignorance to exposure, I mean the treatment of an ignorance which is not to be cured by information (because it is not caused by a lack of information) outlines one motive to philosophy; this is a reason for calling Shakespeare's theater one of philosophical drama. (A test of this would be to consider that the experience of these discoveries—or their proper organ—is as of memory. What precedes certain discoveries is a necessity to *return* to a work, in fact or in memory, as to unfinished business. And this may be neutral as between re-reading and re-seeing. Then one recalls that one sense of philosophy takes memory as its organ of knowledge. An outstanding question is then: What sends us back to a piece or a passage?—as though it is not finished with us. In the opening pages of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge takes as his first measure of the worth of a poem the fact that we return to it. Knowing that not just any way of returning will constitute such a measure (say, one in order to prepare for tomorrow's lesson, or to look up an illustration for a thing one already knows), he adds that the return is to be made "with the greatest pleasure." But he is not there concerned to characterize the nature of this pleasure, nor our need of it. The trouble with speaking of this returning as a *remembering* is that it provides access to something we haven't first known and then *forgotten*. Suppose we say that the experience is one of *having to remember*. Then one thinks of Wordsworth's rehearsal (in Book VIII of the *Prelude*) of the motive, and resolution, to know of good and evil, "not as for the mind's delight but for her safety"—the feminine cast registering the mind's need for protection, but the masculine drift showing knowledge that such safety is not achieved through protection, but in action. Evidently Wordsworth is not speaking merely of his past, but of the motive, and resolution, to write—write poetry of such ambitions as the poem he is now writing, and thus give to action the body of the past joined with the soul of the present. And why should the need



that sends us back to art be disconnected from the necessity upon which the artist goes for it?)

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A structural strategy in *King Lear* brings this out another way. The abdication scene has always been known to be extraordinary, and a familiar justification of it has been that we, as spectators, simply must accept it as the initial condition of the dramatic events and then attend to its consequences. Of course we can do this, or something like it: In a certain context someone says, "Once upon a time there was an old King who had three daughters. Two were very cruel, but the youngest, who was very good and beautiful, was her father's favorite. . . ." So people sometimes say that *King Lear* opens as a fairy tale opens. But it doesn't. It is not narrated, and the first characters we see are two old courtiers discussing the event of the day. The element of fairy tale then appears, centered in other characters, against whose mode of reality the opening figures we have met stand as measures and witnesses, here and hereafter, thus at once heightening and confining the unreal or unseen power we may respond to as a "fairy tale character," focussing it upon the figure of Lear and suggesting it to be something whose sudden changes befall ordinary human beings. If the drama is taken to show the tragic consequences of this initial condition, it should simultaneously be taken to show, what fairy tales have always known, the lengths there are to go in order to remove a spell; the purity, above all the faithfulness it requires. In Shakespeare's world this was still visible only in extraordinary events. By the time of the worlds of Ibsen and Chekhov, after fairy tales had been collected and shelved, the spell finds its life in our ordinary lives: nothing can break the one without breaking the other. I have pointed to other explicit moments of magic in the play, Cordelia's kiss and Lear's song to her. The moral of such moments extends back to the abdication scene: there is no problem of *accepting* them; on the contrary, they are—well, magical.

The idea that the abdication scene strains belief suggests a careful ignorance of the quick routes taken in one's own rages and jealousies and brutalities. Obviously what makes it believable is not an overwhelming tenderness (*that* temptation is yet to come); what is apparently irresistible is recourse to some interpretation which dead-

ens awareness of the ordinary, the civilized violence escaping from it (recourses such as "ritualistic," "fairy tale," "an old crochety tyrant," "an archaic setting"). This uncovers what I meant by the structural strategy of the play's opening scene: we *do* accept its events as they come to light; anyway we sit through them, and we accommodate ourselves to them one way or another; after which, as a consequence of which, we have to accept less obviously extraordinary events as unquestionable workings out of a bad beginning. To speak of this as a strategy may suggest that Shakespeare intended it to have this effect; and do I want to make such a claim? But why not? A critic who strains at this claim will allow himself to swallow the notion that Shakespeare counted on the fact that he was only using an old story whose initial improbabilities he needn't be responsible for. Maybe. Only this raises, and makes unwelcome, urgent questions: Why does he use *this* story? What does he see in it? Why *show* the abdication rather than begin with various accounts of it? Whereas all I need as evidence for saying that Shakespeare intended the strategy of our accepting it (that is, all the claim comes to) is that he put it there and we do accept it, if in confusion. If further explanation is required, then I have equally clear facts to appeal to: what we witness is simultaneously confirmed by the rest of the audience, if the work is successful (this cognitive function of audience is, so far as I know, unremarked, but it seems to me as evident as the contagion and power of laughter an audience can generate, or the enthusiasm it inspires in a public utterance); again, we are helped by the initial verisimilitude in the characters of Kent and Gloucester; and helped further in seeing that no one present on the stage *accepts* Lear's behavior—all who speak (save one) find it extraordinary. So should we. But also ordinary. And a strategy whose point is to break up our sense of the ordinary (which is not the same as a strategy whose point is to present us with spectacularly extraordinary events) also has claim to be called philosophical: this is perhaps why an essential response in both philosophy and tragedy is that of wonder. (Later versions of this strategy are Marxian and Kierkegaardian dialectic, which dramatize both the historical contingency in states we had hitherto accepted as inevitable and the necessity in states we had hitherto thought passing.)

Having lost the power to distinguish the acceptable from the questionable, do we nevertheless still know right from wrong? What-

ever the gaudy distractions of Christianizing in reading Shakespeare's plays, it serves him better than the stinting distractions of moralizing. Many critics seem to know quite well what is good for Lear and what he ought not to have done.<sup>14</sup> But suppose we are merely scrupulous and compassionate enough to recognize that any of this is what we do not know, or anyway that the characters themselves know every bit as much in that line as we do. (If not, then again it is not tragedy which has been revealed.) The form of problem we face is: Why *can't* they do or see something? What power has taken them over? For the *content* of Lear's conflict is not tragic, I mean the public conflict—he need not, for example, choose either to sacrifice his daughter or the lives of his subjects. Here the well-known experience of *inevitability* in a tragic sequence comes to attention. But to what shall we attribute it? Not, in all conscience, and after Bradley, to Fate or character or some over-riding classical passion—not merely because we can no longer attach old weight to these words, but because, immediately, they do not account for the particular lie of events in the plots Shakespeare selects for tragedy. And more important, they are directly false to our experience, which is, for all their hidden manipulation, by circumstance or passion, that these figures are radically and continuously *free*, operating under their own power, at every moment choosing their destruction. Kant tells us that man lives in two worlds, in one of which he is free and in the other determined. It is as if in a theater these two worlds are faced off against one another, in their intimacy and their mutual inaccessibility. The audience is free—of the circumstance and passion of the characters, but that freedom cannot reach the arena in which it could become effective. The actors are determined—not because their words and actions are dictated and their future sealed, but because, if the dramatist has really peopled a world, his characters are exercising all the freedom at their command, and specifically failing to. Specifically; not exercising or ceding it once for all. They are, in a word, men; and our liabilities in responding to them are nothing other than our liabilities in responding to any man—rejection, brutality, sentimentality, indifference, the relief and the terror in finding courage, the ironies of human wishes.

It was not wrong to read the sense of inevitability in terms of a

<sup>14</sup> This is the attitude that Alpers' study is meant most directly to discourage.

chain of cause and effect; what was wrong, what became insufficient to explain our lives, was to read this chain as if its first link lay in the past, and hence as if the present were the scene of its ineluctable effects, in the face of which we must learn suffering. With Kant (because with Luther) and then Hegel and Nietzsche, not to say Freud, we became responsible for the meaning of the suffering itself, indeed for the very fact that the world is to be comprehended under the rule of causation at all. What has become inevitable is the fact of endless causation itself, together with the fact of incessant freedom. And what has become the tragic fact is that we cannot or will not tell which is which. When tragedy leapt from inevitability, we had been taken into the confidence of the tale, hints of the characters' ignorance of their fate were laid ("dramatic irony"). The awe in experiencing it was like the awe in suddenly falling into the force of nature or of crowds or in watching a building collapse. We are not in Shakespeare's confidence. Now tragedy grows from the fortunes we choose to interpret, to accept, as inevitable, and we have no more hints of ignorance than the characters have. Edmund sees something like this (in his early soliloquy, ". . . we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars . . ."), but, being Edmund, he finds it comic. And no play can show more instances and ranges than *King Lear* in which God's name and motive are taken in vain. The past cannot now be clarified as Teiresias clarified it (that would now be a relief, however terrible its terms) for the present is not clear or strong enough to believe such predictions. It is only about *others* that prophecy commands our attention. (Hence, for example, the vogue of Game Theory, and the fashion of looking for the "cause" of historical events.) But the seer is not needed. Nothing we can know or need to know is unknown.



"Surely," it will be said, "whatever all this is supposed to mean, it is not relevant to our relation with those figures up there, it applies at best to their relations with one another, or to ours with one another. You forget this is theater; that they are characters up there, not persons; that their existence is fictional; that it is not up to us to confront them morally, actually enter their lives." How might I forget this? By becoming like the child who screams at Red Riding Hood the truth of her situation? But I don't scream out, any longer;

that is just a matter of getting older and learning how to behave. (Though of course "just a matter" does not mean that it is not profound learning. It is as profound as learning not to wet the bed, and I can do that in my sleep. If I couldn't, the learning wouldn't yet have amounted to much.) What am I to remember, and what good would it do if I did? I know people are annoyed by what seems feigned innocence, and with a final mustering of patience they tell me that I am to remember that I am in a theater. And how do I do that? How do I remember something there is no obvious way for me to forget? ("Don't forget where you are" is not meant to inform me of the place I am in, but calls to my attention a more or less distracted or obsessive piece of behavior which I immediately know to be unacceptable there—like smoking in church.) Am I to remember to be entertained? But suppose I am not; why should I be? Am I to remember that I am not responsible for those people up there? Presumably this is not a way of saying that they are none of my business or that they have not been made real for me by their creator. But what else is it a way of saying? Am I to remember that I do not have to confront them, give them my warnings or advice or compassion? But I am confronting them (unless my head or heart is lowered, in fear or boredom) and I *have* this advice or warning or compassion or anxiety; if you haven't, you don't see what I see. But I cannot *offer* it to them or *share* it with them. That is true; they cannot hear my screams. But that is something else; that is something I do not have to remember, something I know as I know that I cannot choose the content of my dreams or suffer my daughter's pain or alter my father's childhood.

So the question arises: Why do I choose to subject myself to this suffering? Why do I deliberately confront a situation which fills me with a pity and terror I know are ineffective? Two familiar lines of answer have been drawn to such a question. One of them looks to the use to be made of these feelings in the aesthetic context, their (cathartic) effect upon *me*; the other denies that it is real pity and terror that I feel, but rather some aesthetic (more or less distant) counterpart of them. Whatever their respective merits and obscurities, both answers pass the sense of the question which is troubling me, which is brought out by asking: How do I know I am to *do* nothing, confronted by such events? The answer, "Because it is an aesthetic context" is no answer, partly because no one knows what

an aesthetic context is, partly because, if it means anything, a factor of its meaning is "a context in which I am to do nothing"; which is the trouble.

But my object here is not a theory of tragedy. It is simply to suggest, staying within the evidence of the reading I have given of one play, how this mode of drama works upon us and what mode of perception it asks of us. For I feel confident not only that this play works upon us differently from other modes of theater, but that it is dramatic in a way, or at a depth, foreign to what we have come to expect in a theater, even that it is essentially dramatic in a way our theater and perception does not fathom. These are scarcely new thoughts, but no statement of them I know has seemed to me to get out clearly enough what this sense of drama is. Doubtless only someone who shares this sense will credit or consider the few suggestions I can make about it here.



Clearly, as we are always told, its particular dramatic effect is a function of the fact that its words are poetry. Sometimes Shakespeare's plays are said to be poems, but obviously they are not poems; they are made in a medium which knows how to use poetry dramatically. It is an accomplishment of the same magnitude, even of the same kind, as the discovery of perspective in painting and of tonality in music—and, apparently, just as irretrievable, for artistic purposes now. The question is: How does the medium function which uses poetry in this way?

It is not uncommon to find Shakespeare's plays compared to music, but in the instances I have seen, this comparison rests upon more or less superficial features of music, for example, on its balance of themes, its recurrences, shifts of mood, climaxes—in a word, on its theatrical properties. But music is, or was, dramatic in a more fundamental sense, or it became so when it no longer expanded festivals or enabled dancing or accompanied songs, but achieved its own dramatic autonomy, worked out its progress in its own terms. Perhaps this begins with Monteverdi (born three years after Shakespeare), but in any case it is secured only with the establishment of tonality and has its climax in the development of sonata form. The essence of the quality I have in mind has to do with the notion of *development*: not, as in early sonata forms, merely with an isolated

section in which fragments of earlier material are recolored and reassembled, but with the process, preeminent in late Beethoven and Brahms, in which the earlier is metamorphosed into new stabilities, culminating in a work like the *Hammerklavier* Sonata, in which *all* later material can be said to be "contained" in the rising and falling interval of a third in the opening two bars. The question I wish to raise here is: How is music made this way to be perceived? *What* are we to perceive in order to understand and respond to what is said? Obviously not, in the example alluded to, merely or primarily the rising and falling thirds. I will say that the quality we are to perceive is one of *directed motion*, controlled by relations of keys, by rate of alteration, and by length and articulation of phrases. We do not know where this motion can stop and we do not understand why it has begun here, so we do not know where we stand nor why we are there. The drama consists in following this out and in finding out what it takes to follow this out.

The specific comparison with Shakespeare's drama has to do with the two most obvious facts about what is required in following this music: first, that one hears its directedness; second, that one hears only what is happening now.

The critical element appears to be that of directedness, because obviously all music, and all language and all conduct, shares the property that not everything of significance is perceptible now. And yet there is the decisive difference between waiting for a sentence in prose or conversation to end and attending to a line of poetry or a tonal phrase, a difference suggested by such facts as these: in conversation, a remark which begins a certain way can normally have only one of a definite set of endings; we know why a remark has begun as it has or we can find out why in obvious ways; and the remark will come to an end of its own accord, what counts as an end is given in the language; so if, for example, we *hang* on these words, that is not because of something happening in these words before us now. It is as if dramatic poetry and tonal music, forgoing these givens, are made to imitate the simplest facts of life: that life is lived in time, that there is a now at which everything that happens happens, and a now at which for each man everything stops happening, and that what has happened is not here and now, and that what might have happened then and there will never happen then and there, and that what will happen is not here and now and yet may be settled by what

is happening here and now in a way we cannot know or will not see here and now. The perception or attitude demanded in following this drama is one which demands a continuous attention to what is happening at each here and now, as if everything of significance is happening at this moment, while each thing that happens turns a leaf of time. I think of it as an experience of *continuous presentness*. Its demands are as rigorous as those of any spiritual exercise—to let the past go and to let the future take its time; so that we not allow the past to determine the meaning of what is now happening (something else may have come of it) and that we not anticipate what will come of what has come. Not that anything is possible (though it is) but that we do not know what is, and is not, next.

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Epistemology will demonstrate that we cannot know, cannot be certain of, the future; but we don't believe it. We anticipate, and so we are always wrong. Even when what we anticipate comes to pass we get the wrong idea of our powers and of what our safety depends upon, for we imagine that we *knew* this would happen, and take it either as an occasion for congratulations or for punishments, of ourselves or others. Instead of acting as we can and remaining equal to the consequences. (Here one might consider the implication of the fact that you say "I knew it!" with sharp relief or sudden anguish, and that of course it does not mean that in fact you were fully apprized of a particular outcome. It means, roughly, that "something told you," something you wish you had harkened to. And while that is no doubt true, the frame of mind in which you express it, by saying in that particular way that you *knew*, assures that you will not harken. Because it reveals a frame of mind in which you had tried, and are going on trying now, to alchemize a guess or a hope or a suspicion into a certainty, a *pry* into the future rather than an intimation of conscience.)

Nietzsche thought the metaphysical consolation of tragedy was lost when Socrates set *knowing* as the crown of human activity. And it is a little alarming, from within the conviction that the medium of drama which Shakespeare perfected also ended with him, to think again that Bacon and Galileo and Descartes were contemporary with those events. We will hardly say that it was *because* of the development



of the new science and the establishing of epistemology as the monitor of philosophical inquiry that Shakespeare's mode of tragedy disappeared. But it may be that the loss of presentness—which is what the disappearance of that mode of tragedy means—is what works us into the idea that we can save our lives by knowing them. This seems to be the message both of the new epistemology and of Shakespeare's tragedy themselves.

In the unbroken tradition of epistemology since Descartes and Locke (radically questioned from within itself only in our period), the concept of knowledge (of the world) disengages from its connections with matters of information and skill and learning, and becomes fixed to the concept of certainty alone, and in particular to a certainty provided by the (by my) senses. At some early point in epistemological investigations, the world normally present to us (the world in whose existence, as it is typically put, we "believe") is brought into question and vanishes, whereupon all connection with a world is found to hang upon what can be said to be "present to the senses"; and that turns out, shockingly, not to be the world. It is at this point that the doubter finds himself cast into skepticism, turning the existence of the external world into a problem. Kant called it a scandal to philosophy and committed his genius to putting a stop to it, but it remains active in the conflicts between traditional philosophers and their ordinary language critics, and it inhabits the void of comprehension between continental ontology and Anglo-American analysis as a whole. Its relevance to us at the moment is only this: The skeptic does not gleefully and mindlessly forgo the world we share, or thought we shared; he is neither the knave Austin took him to be, nor the fool the pragmatists took him for, nor the simpleton he seems to men of culture and of the world. He forgoes the world for just the reason that the world is important, that it is the scene and stage of connection with the present: he finds that it vanishes exactly with the effort to *make* it present. If this makes him unsuccessful, that is because the presentness achieved by certainty of the senses cannot compensate for the presentness which had been elaborated through our old absorption in the world. But the wish for genuine connection is there, and there was a time when the effort, however hysterical, to assure epistemological presentness was the best expression of seriousness about our relation to the world, the expression of

an awareness that presentness was threatened, gone. If epistemology wished to make knowing a substitute for that fact, that is scarcely foolish or knavish, and scarcely some simple mistake. It is, in fact, one way to describe the tragedy *King Lear* records.

For its characters, having for whatever reason to forgo presentness to their worlds, extend that disruption in their knowing of it (Lear and Edmund knowing they cannot be loved, Regan knowing the destination of Gloucester, Edgar knowing he is contemned and has to win acceptance). But how do we stop? How do we learn that what we need is not more knowledge but the willingness to forgo knowing? For this sounds to us as though we are being asked to abandon reason for irrationality (for we know what these are and we know these are alternatives), or to trade knowledge for superstition (for we know when conviction is the one and when it is the other—the thing the superstitious always take for granted). This is why we think skepticism must mean that we cannot know the world exists, and hence that perhaps there isn't one (a conclusion some profess to admire and others to fear). Whereas what skepticism suggests is that since we cannot know the world exists, its presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing. The world is to be *accepted*; as the presentness of other minds is not to be known, but acknowledged. But what is this "acceptance," which caves in at a doubt? And where do we get the idea that there is something we cannot do (e.g., prove that the world exists)? For this is why we take Kant to have said that there are things we cannot know; whereas what he said is that something cannot be known—and cannot coherently be doubted either, for example, that there is a world and that we are free. When Luther said we cannot know God but must have faith, it is clear enough that the inability he speaks of is a logical one: there is not some comprehensible activity we cannot perform, and equally not some incomprehensible activity we cannot perform. Our relation to God is that of parties to a testament (or refusers of it); and Luther's logical point is that you do not accept a promise by knowing something about the promisor. How, if this is the case, we become confused about it clearly requires explanation, and the cure will be sufficiently drastic—crucifying the intellect. But perhaps no less explanation is required to understand why we have the idea that knowing the world exists is to be understood as an instance of knowing that a particular object exists (only, so to speak, an enormously large one, the largest). Yet

this idea is shared by all traditional epistemologists.<sup>15</sup> (Its methodological expression is the investigation of our knowledge of the external world by an investigation of a claim that a particular object exists.) Nor is it surprising that it is the intellect which, still bloody from its victories, remains to be humbled if the truth here is to emerge. Reason seems able to overthrow the deification of everything but itself. To imagine that what is therefore required of us is a new rage of irrationality would be about as intelligent as to imagine that because heaven rejects the prideful man what it craves is a monkey. For the point of forgoing knowledge is, of course, to know.

To overcome knowing is a task Lear shares with Othello and Macbeth and Hamlet, one crazed by knowledge he can neither test nor reject, one haunted by knowledge whose authority he cannot impeach, one cursed by knowledge he cannot share. Lear abdicates sanity for the usual reason: it is his way not to know what he knows, or to know only what he knows. At the end, recovered to the world, he still cannot give up knowledge, the knowledge that he is captured, lost, receiving just punishment, and so he does again the thing for which he will now irrecoverably be punished. It is the thing we do not know that can save us. (This is what fairy tales told, when third sons collected or comforted abandoned things and hags. It is what

<sup>15</sup> A particularly brilliant occurrence of it runs through Hume's *Dialogues on Natural Religion*: It is the essential assumption of Cleanthes (the new believer) which Philo (the new skeptic) does not question, and I suppose that one or other of them, or both together, pretty well exhaust Hume's discoveries in this region. Freed from this assumption, the *experience* of design or purpose in the world (which Cleanthes always begins with and comes back to, and which Philo confirms) has a completely different force. It is no longer a modest surmise about a particular object, for which there is no good evidence (none against, but none for); but rather, being a natural and *inescapable* response, it has, in terms of Hume's own philosophizing, the same claim to reveal the world as our experience of causation (or of objecthood) has. —This is essentially the view of Hume's *Dialogues* that I have presented in my classes over a number of years. In the spring of 1967 I began studying and teaching the writings of Heidegger, and the discussion of the concepts of *world* and *worldhood* near the beginning of *Being and Time* seem to me not only intuitively clear against this background, but to represent the beginnings of a formidable phenomenological investigation of a phase of empiricism, indeed of traditional epistemology altogether. Part II of this essay bears marks of that reading, notably in the transition from the concept of being in someone's *presence* to that of being in his *present* (e.g., p. 337); but the ideas do not derive from that reading, and my understanding of Heidegger's work is still too raw for me to wish to claim support from it.

I am not unaware of the desperate obscurity of these remarks about traditional epistemology, both in this note and in the section of this essay from which it is suspended. That is the point at which my reliance on my doctoral thesis (cited in the Acknowledgments) is most sustained.

theology knew as grace. Ignorance of it is the damnation of Faust, the one piece of knowledge he could not bargain for.)

In addition to the notions of continuous presentness and of the attempt to overcome knowledge, I have sometimes wanted to speak of the *reality of time* as a way of hitting off the experience of this mode of drama. At each moment, until their last, the future of each character in *King Lear* is open; and in the end each closes it, except for Cordelia, who chooses, out of love, to let it close. This is not the way time is conceived in other dramaturgy. In *Phèdre*, time is frozen, as place is; the action is transfixed by the lucidity which arrays itself against the truth, absorbing its brilliance, and the lucidity which supervenes as truth breaks through. In Ibsen, time is molded to fit the moments at which drama, carefully prepared, explodes into the action. It depends for its effect not on the fact of time but upon the feats of timing, upon something's happening at the right, or the wrong, time. One slip and it is melodrama; but then one slip and Racine is oratory. In *Phèdre* we are placed unprotected under heaven, examined by an unblinking light. In *Hedda Gabler*, we watch and wait, unable to avert our eyes, as if from an accident or an argument rising at the next table in a restaurant, or a figure standing on the ledge of a skyscraper. In *King Lear* we are differently implicated, placed into a world not obviously unlike ours (as Racine's is, whose terrain we could not occupy) nor obviously like ours (as Ibsen's is, in whose rooms and rhythms we are, or recently were, at home), and somehow participating in the proceedings—not listening, not watching, not overhearing, almost as if dreaming it, with words and gestures carrying significance of that power and privacy and obscurity; and yet participating, as at a funeral or marriage or inauguration, confirming something; it could not happen without us. It is not a dispute or a story, but history happening, and we are living through it; later we may discover what it means, when we discover what a life means.



In each case the first task of the dramatist is to gather us and then to silence and immobilize us. Or say that it is the poster which has gathered us and the dimming house-lights which silence us. Then the first task of the dramatist is to reward this disruption, to show that this very extraordinary behavior, sitting in a crowd in the dark,

is very sane. It is here that we step past the carry of Dr. Johnson's words. He is right in dismissing—anyway, in denying—the idea that we need to have what happens in a theater made credible, and right to find that such a demand proceeds from a false idea that otherwise what happens in a theater is incredible, and right to say that our response to the events on a stage is neither to credit nor to discredit them: we know we are in a theater. But then he does not stop to ask, What is it that we then know? What is a theater? Why are we there?—anyway, not for longer than it takes to answer, “. . . the spectators . . . come to hear a certain number of lines recited with just gesture and elegant modulation.” It is not clear to me how seriously this straight-faced remark is meant. Its rhetoric may be that of the academic's put-down of the enthusiast. (Listeners come to an opera to hear a certain number of tunes sung with just pitch and elegant phrasing. Spectators at a football game go to see a certain number of gigantic men attack one another for the possession of a bag of air.) Or it may be that *Garrick's* gestures and modulations were worth assembling for. Or it may be that the London theaters of that time typically provided an experience of expert recitation. What seems clear enough is that the theater was not important to Johnson; that a certain provision of inside entertainment was sufficient to justify the expense of an evening there. But if the point is entertainment, then his difficult acquaintance Hume had re-raised a question which needs attention: Why should such matters provide entertainment? Hume's even more difficult acquaintance Rousseau, for whom the theater was important, re-raised the next question: What is the good of such entertainment?

What is the state of mind in which we find the events in a theater neither credible nor incredible? The usual joke is about the Southern yokel who rushes to the stage to save Desdemona from the black man. What is the joke? That he doesn't know how to behave in a theater? That would be plausible here, in a way it would not be plausible in accounting for, or dealing with, the child screaming at Red Riding Hood, or the man lighting a cigarette in church. It treats him like the visitor who drinks from the finger bowl. That fun depends upon the anxious giggle at seeing our customs from a distance, letting them show for a moment in their arbitrariness. We have no trouble understanding what his mistake has been, and the glimpse of arbitrariness is beneficial because the custom justifies itself again: we see the point

of having the finger bowl and so (apart from threats to symbol and caste) it doesn't matter that there are other ways of keeping clean, it is enough that this is our way. But what mistake has the yokel in the theater made, and what is *our* way? He thinks someone is strangling someone. —But that is true; Othello is strangling Desdemona. —Come on, come on; you know, he thinks that very man is putting out the light of that very woman right now. —Yes, and that is exactly what is happening. —You're not amusing. The point is that he thinks something is really happening, whereas nothing is really happening. It's play acting. The woman will rise again to die another night. —That is what I thought was meant, what I was impatiently being asked to accede to. The trouble is that I really do not understand what I am being asked, and of course I am suggesting that you do not know either. You tell me that that woman will rise again, but I know that she will not, that she is dead and has died and will again die, die dead, die with a lie on her lips, damned with love. You can say there are two women, Mrs. Siddons and Desdemona, both of whom are mortal, but only one of whom is dying in front of our eyes. But what you have produced is two names. Not all the pointing in the world to *that* woman will distinguish the one woman from the other. The trouble can be put two ways; or, there are two troubles and they pull opposite ways: you can't point to one without pointing to the other; and you can't point to both at the same time. Which just means that *pointing* here has become an incoherent activity. Do you wish to say that Mrs. Siddons has not died, or does not die? These are not incomprehensible remarks, but the first implies that she had been in danger and the second suggests that she is not scheduled for death. At least our positions would then be distinguishable, if incomprehensible. I mean, the intentions with which we go to the theater are equally incomprehensible. You go, according to what has so far come out, in order to find that Mrs. Siddons is not dead; I go to watch Desdemona die. I don't particularly enjoy the comparison, for while I do not share your tastes they seem harmless enough, where mine are very suspect.

The case of the yokel has its anxieties. How do we imagine we might correct him?—that is, *what* mistake do we suppose him to have made? If we grant him the concept of play-acting, then we will tell him that this is an instance of it: "They are only acting; it isn't real." But we may not be perfectly happy to have had to say that. Not that

we doubt that it is true. If the thing *were* real. . . . But somehow we had *accepted* its non-factuality, it made it possible for there to have been a play. When we say it, in assurance, it comes out as an empirical assertion. Doubtless it has a very high degree of probability, anyway there is no reason to think that Mrs. Siddons is in danger; though of course it is not logically absurd to suppose otherwise.

—But now our philosophical repressions are getting out of control. This isn't at all what we meant to be saying. Beforehand, her danger was absolutely out of the question, we did not have to rule it out in order to go on enjoying the proceedings. We do not *have* to now either, and yet the empirical and the transcendental are not as clearly separate as, so to speak, we thought they were. "They are only pretending" is something we typically say to children, in reassurance; and it is no happier a thing to say in that context, and no truer. The point of saying it there is not to focus them on the play, but to help bring them out of it. It is not an instructive remark, but an emergency measure. If the child cannot be brought out of the play by working through the content of the play itself, he should not have been subjected to it in the first place.

Neither credible nor incredible: that ought to mean that the concept of credibility is inappropriate altogether. The trouble is, it is inappropriate to real conduct as well, most of the time. That couple over there, drinking coffee, talking, laughing. Do I believe they are just passing the time of day, or testing out the field for a flirtation, or something else? In usual cases, not one thing or another; I neither believe nor disbelieve. Suppose the man suddenly puts his hands to the throat of the woman. Do I believe or disbelieve that he is going to throttle her? The time for that question, as soon as it comes to the point, is already passed. The question is: What, if anything, do I do? What I believe hangs on what I do or do not do and on how I react to what I do or do not do. And whether something or nothing, there will be consequences. At the opening of the play it is fully true that I neither believe nor disbelieve. But I am something, perplexed, anxious. . . . Much later, the warrior asks his wife if she has said her prayers. Do I believe he will go through with it? I know he will, it is a certainty fixed forever; but I hope against hope he will come to his senses; I appeal to him, in silent shouts. Then he puts his hands on her throat. The question is: What, if anything, do I do? I do nothing; that is a certainty fixed forever. And it has its consequences.

*Why* do I do nothing? Because they are only pretending? That would be a reason not to do anything if it were true of the couple over there, who just a moment ago were drinking coffee, laughing. There it is a reason because it tells me something I did not know. Here, in the theater, what does it tell me? It is an excuse, whistling in the dark; and it is false. Othello is not pretending. Garrick is not pretending, any more than a puppet in that part would be pretending. I know everything, and yet the question arises: *Why* do I sit there? And the honest answer has to be: There is nothing I can do. *Why* not?

If the yokel is not granted the concept of play-acting, you will not be able to correct him, and that has its own anxiety; not just that of recognizing that people may be wholly different from oneself, but in making us question the inevitability of our own concept of acting, its lucidity to ourselves. You may then have to restrain him and remove him from the theater; you may even have to go so far as to stop the play. *That* is something we can do; and its very extremity shows how little is in our power. For that farthest extremity has not touched Othello, he has vanished; it has merely interrupted an evening's work. Quiet the house, pick up the thread again, and Othello will reappear, as near and as deaf to us as ever. —The transcendental and the empirical crossing; possibilities shudder from it.

The little joke on the yokel is familiar enough of its kind. The big joke, and not just on the yokel, is his idea that *if* the thing were in fact happening he would be able to stop it, be equal to his chivalry. It is fun to contemplate his choices. Will he reason with Othello? (After Iago has destroyed his reason.) Tell him the truth? (Which the person who loves him has been doing over and over.) Threaten him, cross swords with him? (That, one would like to see.) —There is nothing and we know there is nothing we can do. Tragedy is meant to make sense of that condition.

It is said by Dr. Johnson, and felt by Tom Jones' friend Partridge, that what we credit in a tragedy is a possibility, a recognition that if we were in such circumstances we would feel and act as those characters do. But I do not consider it a very live possibility that I will find myself an exotic warrior, having won the heart of a young high-born girl by the power of my past and my capacity for poetry, then learning that she is faithless. And if I did find myself in that position I haven't any idea what I would feel or do. —That is not



what is meant? Then what is? That I sense the possibility that I will feel impotent to prevent the object I have set my soul on, and won, from breaking it; that it is possible that I will trust someone who wishes me harm; that I can become murderous with jealousy and know chaos when my imagination has been fired and then gutted and the sense of all possibility has come to an end? But I know, more or less, these things now; and if I did not, I would not know what possibility I am to envision as presented by this play.

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It may seem perverse or superficial or plain false to insist that we *confront* the figures on a stage. It may seem perverse: because it is so obvious what is meant in saying we do *not* confront them, namely, that they are characters in a play. The trouble with this objection is its assumption that it is obvious what kind of existence characters in a play have, and obvious what our relation to them is, obvious why we are present. Either what I have been saying makes these assumptions less comfortable, or I have failed to do what I wished to do. It may seem superficial: because saying that we "confront" them seems just a fancy way of saying that we *see* them, and nobody would care to deny that. The trouble is that we no more merely see these characters than we merely see people involved elsewhere in our lives—or, if we do merely see them that shows a specific response to the claim they make upon us, a specific form of acknowledgment; for example, rejection. It may seem plain false: because we can no more confront a character in a play than we can confront any fictitious being.

The trouble is, there they are. The plain fact, the only plain fact, is that we do not *go up* to them, even that we cannot. —"Obviously not. Their existence is fictional." —Meaning what? That they are not real? Meaning what? That they are not to be met with in space and time? This means they are not in nature. (That is, as Leibniz puts it, they are not objects to which one of *every* pair of opposite predicates truly applies—e.g., that one or the other of them has children or has not, ate breakfast or did not. But no such pair can be ruled out in advance of coming to know a character; and more is true of him than we take in at a glance, or in a generation of glances. And more that we are responsible for knowing. Call him our creation, but then say that creation is an exhausting business. It would not be creation from nothing, but from everything—that is,

from a totality, the world of the words.) And neither is God in nature, neither are square roots, neither is the spirit of the age or the correct tempo of the Great Fugue. But if these things do not exist, that is not because they are not in nature. And there have so far always been certain people who have known how to find each of them. Calling the existence of Lear and others "fictional" is incoherent (if understandable) when used as an explanation of their existence, or as a denial of their existence. It is, rather, the name of a problem: *What* is the existence of a character on the stage, what kind of (grammatical) entity is this? We know several of its features:

1. A character is not, and cannot become, aware of us. Darkened, indoor theaters dramatize the fact that the audience is invisible. A theater whose house lights were left on (a possibility suggested, for other reasons, by Brecht) might dramatize the equally significant fact that we are also inaudible to them, and immovable (that is, at a *fixed* distance from them). I will say: We are not in their presence.

2. They are in our presence. This means, again, not simply that we are seeing and hearing them, but that we are acknowledging them (or specifically failing to). Whether or not we acknowledge others is not a matter of choice, any more than accepting the presence of the world is a matter of choosing to see or not to see it. Some persons sometimes are capable of certain blindnesses or deafnesses toward others; but, for example, avoidance of the presence of others is not blindness or deafness to their claim upon us; it is as conclusive an acknowledgment that they are present as murdering them would be. Tragedy shows that we are responsible for the death of others even when we have not murdered them, and even when we have not manslaughtered them innocently. As though what we have come to regard as our normal existence is itself poisoning.

But doesn't the fact that we do not or cannot go up to them just mean that we do not or cannot acknowledge them? One may feel like saying here: The acknowledgment cannot be *completed*. But this does not mean that acknowledging is impossible in a theater. Rather it shows what acknowledging, in a theater, is. And acknowledging in a theater shows what acknowledgment in actuality is. For what is the difference between tragedy in a theater and tragedy in actuality? In both, people in pain are in our presence. But in actuality acknowledgment *is* incomplete, in actuality there is no acknowledgment, unless we put ourselves in their presence, reveal ourselves to

them. We may find that the point of tragedy in a theater is exactly relief from this necessity, a respite within which to prepare for this necessity, to clean out the pity and terror which stand in the way of acknowledgment outside. ("Outside of here it is death"—maybe Hamm the actor has the theater in mind.)

3. How is acknowledgment expressed; that is, how do we put ourselves in another's presence? In terms which have so far come out, we can say: By revealing ourselves, by allowing ourselves to be seen. When we do not, when we keep ourselves in the dark, the consequence is that we convert the other into a character and make the world a stage for him. There is fictional existence with a vengeance, and there is the theatricality which theater such as *King Lear* must overcome, is meant to overcome, shows the tragedy in failing to overcome.<sup>16</sup> The conditions of theater literalize the conditions we exact for existence outside—hiddenness, silence, isolation—hence make that existence plain. Theater does not expect us simply to stop theatricalizing; it knows that we can theatricalize its condi-

<sup>16</sup> That the place of art is now pervasively threatened by the production of objects whose hold upon us is theatrical, and that serious modernist art survives only in its ability to defeat theater, are companion subjects of Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" (*Artforum*, Volume V, No. 10, June, 1967, pp. 12-23). It is, among other things, the most useful and enlightening explanation of the tastes and ambitions of the fashionable modern sensibility I know of. Its conjunction with what I am saying in this essay (even to the point of specific concepts, most notably that of "presentness") is more exact than can be made clear in a summary, and will be obvious to anyone reading it. I take this opportunity to list other of Fried's recent writings which develop the notions and connections of modernism and seriousness and theatricality, but which I have not had occasion to cite specifically: "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings," *Artforum*, Volume V, No. 3, November, 1966, pp. 18-27; "The Achievement of Morris Louis," *Artforum*, Volume V, No. 6, February, 1967, pp. 34-40 (the material of this essay is incorporated in Fried's forthcoming book on Louis, to be published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc.); "New Work by Anthony Caro," *Artforum*, Volume V, No. 6, February, 1967, pp. 46-47; "Jules Olitski," introductory essay to the catalogue of an exhibition of Olitski's work at the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C., April-June, 1967; "Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro," *Artforum*, Volume VI, No. 6, February 1968, pp. 24-25. Because Fried's work is an instance of what I called "philosophical criticism" (p. 313), let me make explicit the fact that this title is not confined to such pieces as "Art and Objecthood" nor to those on Stella and on Olitski, all of which are intensely theoretical or speculative; it applies equally to the two short pieces on Caro, each of which just consists of uninterrupted descriptions (in the first case of four, in the second case of two) of Caro's sculptures. Moreover, this writing would not be "philosophical" in the relevant sense if it did not essentially contain, or imply, descriptions of that sort. Not, of course, that I suppose my having spoken of "bringing the world of a particular work to consciousness of itself" (*ibid.*), will convey what sorts of descriptions these are, to anyone who has not felt them. To characterize them further would involve investigations of such phenomena as "attending to the words themselves" and "faithfulness to a text."

tions as we can theatricalize any others. But in giving us a place within which our hiddenness and silence and separation are accounted for, it gives us a chance to stop.

When we had the idea that acknowledgment must be incomplete in a theater, it was as if we felt *prevented* from approaching the figures to whom we respond. But we are not prevented; we merely in fact, or in convention, do not. Acknowledgment is complete without that; that is the beauty of theater. It is right to think that in a theater *something* is omitted which must be made good outside. But what is omitted is not the claim upon us, and what would make good the omission is not necessarily approaching the other. For approaching him outside does not satisfy the claim, apart from making ourselves present. (Works without faith.) Then what expresses acknowledgment in a theater? What plays the role there that revealing ourselves plays outside? That is, what counts as putting ourselves into a character's presence? I take this to be the same as the question I asked at the beginning of this discussion: What is the mechanism of our identification with a character? We know we cannot approach him, and not because it is not done but because nothing would count as doing it. Put another way, they and we do not occupy the same space; there is no path from my location to his. (We could also say: there is no distance between us, as there is none between me and a figure in my dream, and none, or no one, between me and my image in a mirror.) We do, however, occupy the same time.

And the time is always now; time is measured solely by what is now happening to them, for what they are doing now is all that is happening. The time is of course not necessarily *the* present—that is up to the playwright. But the time presented, whether the present or the past, is this moment, at which an arrival is awaited, in which a decision is made or left unmade, at which the past erupts into the present, in which reason or emotion fail. . . . The novel also comprises these moments, but only as having happened—not necessarily *in* the past; that is up to the novelist. —But doesn't this amount only to saying that novels are narrated and that the natural sound of narration is the past tense? Whereas plays have no narrator. —What does it mean to say they "have no narrator," as though having one is the normal state of affairs? One may feel: the lack of a narrator means that we confront the characters more

directly, without interposed descriptions or explanations. But then couldn't it equally be said that, free of the necessity to describe or explain, the dramatist is free to leave his characters more opaque?

Here I want to emphasize that no character in a play *could* (is, logically, in a position from which to) narrate its events. This can be seen various ways:

1. No mere character, no mere human being, commands the absolute credibility of a narrator. When he (who?) writes: "He lay flat on the brown, pine-needled floor of the forest, his chin on his folded arms, and high overhead the wind blew in the tops of the pine trees," there is no doubt possible that there is a forest here and that its floor is pine-needled and brown, and that a man is lying flat on it. No character commands this credibility of assertion, not because he may not be as honest as a man can be, but because he is an actor; that is, what he is doing or suffering is part of what is happening; he is fixed in the present. The problem is not so much that he cannot, so to speak, see *over* the present, but that he cannot insert a break in it; if he narrates, then *that* is what he is doing, that has become what is now happening. But a narrator cannot, I feel like saying, make anything happen; that is one source of his credibility. (The use of so-called "first person narrative" cedes absolute credibility, but then *this* narrator is not so much a character of the events he describes as he is the antagonist of the reader. We will have to return to this.)

2. This comes out if we notice the two points in *King Lear* at which Shakespeare provides a character with a narration: the Gentleman's account to Kent concerning Cordelia's reception of his letters (*IV, iii, 12-33*) and Edgar's late account of his father's death (*V, iii, 181-218*). As one would expect of any narration by one character to another, these speeches have the effect of interrupting the action, but the difference is that the Gentleman speaks when Shakespeare has interrupted the action for him (or when the events are themselves paused, as for breath); whereas Edgar takes it upon himself to interrupt the action, and as with every other action in this play, Shakespeare tallies its cost. This act of narration occurs within the same continuity of causation and freedom and responsibility as every other act of the play. For it emerges that this long tale has provided the time within which Edmund's writ on the life of Lear and on Cordelia could be executed. Edgar's choice to narrate then and there

is as significant as the content of his narration, and his responsibility for this choice is expressed by the fact that his narration (unlike the Gentleman's) is first person. This further suggests why one may feel that a "first person narrative" is not a narrative; or rather, why the more a first person account takes on the formal properties of a narrative, a tale, the more suspicious the account becomes. For a first person account is, after all, a confession; and the man who has something to confess has something to conceal. And the man who has the word "I" at his disposal has the quickest device for concealing himself. And the man who makes a tale with this word is either distracted from the necessity of authenticating his use of it, or he is admitting that he cannot provide its authentication by himself, and so appealing for relief. We have had occasion to notice moments in Edgar's narration which show that he remains concealed to himself throughout his revelations. The third person narrator, being deprived of self-reference, cannot conceal himself; that is to say, he has no self, and therefore nothing, to conceal. This is another source of his credibility. Then what is the motive for telling us these things? Which really means: What is ours in listening to it?

Philosophy which proceeds from ordinary language is proceeding from the fact *that* a thing is said; that it is (or can be) said (in certain circumstances) is as significant as what it says; its being said then and there is as determinative of what it says as the meanings of its individual words are. This thought can sometimes bring to attention the extraordinary *look* of philosophical writing. The form of, say, Descartes' *Meditations* is that of a first person narrative: "Nevertheless, I must remember that I am a man, and that consequently I am accustomed to sleep and in my dreams to imagine the same things that lunatics imagine when awake, or sometimes things which are even less plausible." But one realizes that there is no particular person the narrative is about (if, that is, one had realized that it looks as if there were some particular person it is about and that if there is not there ought to be some good reason why it sets out to look as if there were), and that its motive, like the motive of a lyric poem, is absolute veracity. And someone whose motive is absolute veracity is likely to be very hard to understand.

3. Accounts which are simultaneous with the events they describe—which are written or spoken in the present tense—are, for instance, reports or announcements; reporters and announcers are

people who tell you what *is* happening. There is room, so to speak, for their activity because they are in a position to know something *we* do not know. But here, in a theater, there is no such position. We are present at what is happening.

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I will say: We are not in, and cannot put ourselves in, the presence of the characters; but we are in, or can put ourselves in, their *present*. It is in making their present ours, their moments as they occur, that we complete our acknowledgment of them. But this requires making their present *theirs*. And that requires us to face not only the porousness of our knowledge (of, for example, the motives of their actions and the consequences they care about) but the repudiation of our perception altogether. This is what a historian has to face in knowing the past: the epistemology of other minds is the same as the metaphysics of other times and places. Those who have felt that the past has to be *made* relevant to the present fall into the typical error of parents and children—taking difference from each other to threaten, or promise, severance from one another. But we are severed; in denying that, one gives up not only knowledge of the position of others but the means of locating one's own. In failing to find the character's present we fail to make *him* present. Then he is indeed a fictitious creature, a figment of my imagination, like all the other people in my life whom I find I have failed to know, have known wrong. How terribly difficult this is to stop doing is indexed by the all but inescapable temptation to think of the past in terms of theater. (For a while I kept a list of the times I read that some past war or revolution was a great drama or that some historical figure was a tragic character on the stage of history. But the list got too long.) As if we were spectators of the past. But from what position are we imagining that we can see it? One there, or one here? The problem is sometimes said to be that we have our own perspective, and hence that we see only from an angle. But that is the same impulse to theatricality, now speaking with a scientific accent. (If bias or prejudice is the issue, then a man has his ordinary moral obligation to get over it.) For there is no *place* from which we can see the past. Our position is to be discovered, and this is done in the painful way it is always done, in piecing it out totally. That the self, to be known truly, must be known in its totality, and

that this is practical, is the teaching, in their various ways, of Hegel, of Nietzsche, and of Freud.

If the suggestion is right that the "completion of acknowledgment" requires self-revelation, then making the characters present must be a form of, or require, self-revelation. Then what is revealed? Not something about me personally. Who my Gloucester is, and where my Dover is, what my shame attaches to, and what love I have exiled in order to remain in control of my shrinking kingdom—these are still my secrets. But perhaps I am better prepared for the necessity to give them up, freed of pity for myself and terror at myself. What I reveal is what I share with everyone else present with me at what is happening: that I am hidden and silent and fixed. In a word, that there is a point at which I am helpless before the acting and the suffering of others. But I know the true point of my helplessness only if I have acknowledged totally the fact and the true cause of their suffering. Otherwise I am not emptied of help, but withholding of it. Tragedy arises from the confusion of these states. Catharsis, if that is the question, is a matter of purging attachment from everything but the present, from pity for the past and terror of the future. My immobility, my transfixing, rightly attained, is expressed by that sense of awe, always recognized as the response to tragedy.<sup>17</sup> In another word, what is revealed is my separateness from what is happening to them; that I am I, and here. It is only in this perception of them as separate from me that I make them present. That I make them *other*, and face them.

And the point of my presence at these events is to join in confirming this separateness. Confirming it as neither a blessing nor a curse, but a fact, the fact of having one life—not one rather than two, but this one rather than any other. I cannot confirm it alone. Rather, it is the nature of this tragedy that its actors have to confirm their separateness alone, through isolation, the denial of others. What is purged is my difference from others, in everything but separateness.

Their fate, up there, out there, is that they must act, they are in the arena in which action is ineluctable. My freedom is that I am

<sup>17</sup> Here I may mention J. V. Cunningham's *Woe or Wonder: The Emotional Effect of Shakespearean Tragedy* (Denver: University of Denver Press, 1951), a work I have more than once had on my mind in thinking of these topics, less for particular detail than for its continuous sense that the effect of tragedy is specific to it, hence part of its logic.



not now in the arena. Everything which can be done is being done. The present in which action is alone possible is fully occupied. It is not that my space is different from theirs but that I have no space within which I can move. It is not that my time is different from theirs but that I have no present apart from theirs. The time in which that hint is laid, in which that knowledge is fixed, in which those fingers grip that throat, is all the time I have. There is no time in which to stop it. At his play, Claudius knows this; which makes him an ideal auditor of serious drama. Only he was unlucky enough to have seen the play after he had actually acted out the consequences of its, and of his, condition: so it caught his conscience instead of scouring it.

Now I can give one answer to the question: Why do I do nothing, faced with tragic events? If I do nothing because I am distracted by the pleasures of witnessing this folly, or out of my knowledge of the proprieties of the place I am in, or because I think there will be some more appropriate time in which to act, or because I feel helpless to un-do events of such proportion, then I continue my sponsorship of evil in the world, its sway waiting upon these forms of inaction. I exit running. But if I do nothing because there is nothing to do, where that means that I have given over the time and space in which action is mine and consequently that I am in awe before the fact that I cannot do and suffer what it is another's to do and suffer, then I confirm the final fact of our separateness. And that is the unity of our condition.

The only essential difference between them and me is that they are there and I am not. And to empty ourselves of all other difference can be confirmed in the presence of an audience, of the community, because every difference established between us, other than separateness, is established by the community—that is, by us, in obedience to the community. It is by responding to this knowledge that the community keeps itself in touch with nature. (With Being, I would say, if I knew how.) If C. L. Barber is right (in *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*) in finding that the point of comedy is to put society back in touch with nature, then this is one ground on which comedy and tragedy stand together. Comedy is fun because it can purge us of the unnatural and of the merely natural by laughing at us and singing to us and dancing for us, and by making us laugh and sing and dance. The tragedy is that comedy has its limits. This is part of the sadness

within comedy; the emptiness after a long laugh. Join hands here as we may, one of the hands is mine and the other is yours.

Fortune, in this light, is an instrument of tragedy not because it turns, and turns outside of us. (This is about what Kent thinks of it—"Fortune, good night; smile once more; turn thy wheel" (*II, ii, 173*); and Edgar—" . . . made tame to Fortune's blows" (*IV, vi, 222*).) This idea can prompt caution, or feed the wish for vengeance, or inspire a pretty and noble renunciation. Noble Kent is sincere, but Edgar is not; as he is voicing his view of Fortune he is waiting for his chance. That he has altered himself in disguising himself becomes revelatory of his character; as it is revelatory of Kent that his disguise does not alter him, he remains the faithful servant through all. Fortune, in the light of this play, is tragic because it is *mine*; not because it wheels but because each man takes his place upon its wheel. This is what I take Edmund and Lear to discover. Edmund, as he is fallen, and with his life over, is waiting his chance to do some good; and he says "The wheel is come full circle; I am here" (*V, iii, 174*). That "I am here"—imitating Abraham's response when God calls his name (Genesis 22:1)—is the natural expression of the knowledge that my life is mine, the ultimate piece of fortune. That is what I understand Lear's huge lines of revelation to mean: ". . . I am bound upon a wheel of fire . . ." (*IV, vii, 46-47*). His tears scald not because his fortunes are low but because he feels them to be his; all the isolated thrusts of rejection, the arbitrary cuts of ingratitude, the loyalties which shamed and the loves which flayed, the curses flung vile and infinite and sterile against the breaking of his state, these all now make sense, they make the sense his life makes, fortune no longer comes from outside, his life is whole, like a wheel which turns. It is here he takes his life wholly upon himself. So his succeeding lines show his sense of rebirth. That one has to die in order to become reborn is one tragic fact; that one's wholeness deprives others of their life is another; that one's love becomes incompatible with one's life and kills the thing it loves is another. Lear is reborn, but into his old self. That is no longer just tragic, it suggests that tragedy itself has become ineffective, out-worn, because now even death does not overcome our difference. Here again, Gloucester's life amplifies Lear's. For it is one thing, and tragic, that we can learn only through suffering. It is something else that we have nothing to learn from it.

Tragedy is not about the fact that all men are mortal (though perhaps it is about the fact that mortals go to any lengths to avoid that knowledge). Every death is about that fact, and attendance at a tragedy is not a substitute for attendance at a funeral. (We need one another's presence for more than one reason.) A tragedy is about a *particular* death, or set of deaths, and specifically about a death which is neither natural or accidental. The death is *inflicted* (as in suicide or homicide) and it is a punishment or an expiation (like an execution or a sacrifice). But if the death is inflicted, it *need* not have happened. So a radical contingency haunts every story of tragedy. Yet no one *knows* that it could have been prevented because no one knows what would have prevented it. By the time we see these events, or any others whose tragedy shows, the maze of character and circumstance is unchartable. Of course if Othello had not met Iago, if Lear had not developed his plan of division, if Macbeth had not listened to his wife. . . . But could these contingencies have been prevented? If one is assured they could have been, one is forgetting who these characters are. For if, for example, Othello hadn't met Iago he would have created another, his magnetism would have selected him and the magic of his union would have inspired him. So a radical necessity haunts every story of tragedy. It is the enveloping of contingency and necessity by one another, the entropy of their mixture, which produces events we call tragic. Or rather, it is why the death which ends a tragedy strikes one as *inexplicable*: necessary, but we do not know why; avoidable, but we do not know how; wrapped in meaning, but the meaning has not come out, and so wrapped in mystery. This is clearest in the case of Lear, where critics differ over whether he dies from grief or (illusory) joy. But it is equally true of Shakespeare's other tragic heroes: we know from the witches well before Macbeth dies that his death will be mysterious, satisfying (in its efforts to evade) a prophecy; Hamlet knows that his death will remain mysterious, because now that it is time he has no time to tell his story, and he knows that Horatio, whom out of friendship he commissions to tell it, does not understand it; Othello dies upon a kiss, and it is as though he dies *from* it. Of course we may in each case determine upon a cause of death; but the cause does not explain *why* they die. And the question is raised.

It is not then answered. There is no answer, of the kind we think there is. No answer outside of us. Edgar's closing lines have

tempted some into looking there for a summary of the play's meaning: "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." But at the beginning Lear and Cordelia spoke what they felt, anyway certainly not what they ought to have said. And so it began. These plays begin as mysteriously as they end, with a crazy ritual, some witches, a ghost, an incomprehensible petulant accusation and denial. And they begin and end this way for the same reason, to maintain us in a present.

At the beginning there is no reason why things have come to this pass, nothing an exposition could clarify. It is a crossroads, they are there. There is danger in the truth that everything which happens is "contained" in these openings. For this postulate of "organic form," the dominant postulate of modern analysis both in poetry and in music, may suggest that what succeeds the presence of the opening is all that *could* have succeeded it. Whereas what succeeds it is one working out of its content. —This is still misleading, for what does "its content" mean? What succeeds the opening is . . . a succession from it. What goes on to happen is not inevitable; but anything that goes on to happen inevitably bears marks of what has gone before. What has gone before was not inevitable, but when it has happened its marks are inevitable. What the idea of "organic structure" omits is the necessity of action, the fact of succession. "The content" of the opening means *nothing* until it is brought out; we could say there is no content until it is brought out. And when it all comes out and is brought to a close its content is not exhausted. We could say, it has infinite content: but what this comes to is that we have stopped pursuing it (or it us), that we have been shown that a stop can be *made*. Of course the artist sees more deeply into the possibilities of succession than we do—so we often praise his faculty of invention; but he also sees more poignantly what does not succeed—and we do not often enough sense his power of silence; and he must also bring whatever happens to a close—but we are rarely grateful enough for his mastery of form, as if we took this mastery to be the observation of formalities (in order that we may anticipate) rather than the formation of the observable (in order that we may see).

At the close of these successions we are still in a present, it is another crossroads. *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet* close with promises of words and understanding to come; as if to say, what has

happened has stopped but it has not come to an end, we have yet to come to terms with what has happened, we do not know where it will end. *Macbeth* closes not with promises of further words, but just with promises, a hurried string of them, as if to get out of the range of Macbeth's eyes, there in his head; as if those present know, but do not care now to linger over the knowledge, that there are still witches unaccounted for. It is at such inopportune moments that we are cast into the arena of action again, crossroads again beneath our feet. Because the actors have stopped, we are freed to act again; but also compelled to. Our hiddenness, our silence, and our placement are now our choices.

One last word, in this light, about a pair of familiar topics in discussions of tragedy. Why are princes (or the high born) the subjects of tragedy? Why is high tragedy no longer, apparently, an available artistic option? Everything said, in my hearing, about the appropriateness of the high born is right enough: they show most dramatically a downfall, which tragedy comments upon; the life of an entire community is staked in their fortunes; they rationalize the use of elevated style, in particular, of poetry. To this list I would add two simple, or geometrical, features of the prince: (1) The state of which he is head, as befits the medieval universe, is closed. The extremest consequences attending on his life and death, however extensive and however high their cost, are finite, run a certain course—so long, that is, as the state survives. However far his life and death have entered his subjects, each has a position from which to assess its effects, and pay for them. (2) His life and death are the largest in his state, hence easiest to see matched or lost to one another; and since his legitimate succession is the only promise of continued life to his state, his death has to be accounted for. When the closed world burst into the infinite universe, consequences became fully unlimited and untraceable. (Lear suffers even this. His bursting is the sign that the play itself, and tragedy as a whole, has burst its bounds. I have had occasion to notice that when the King confuses abdication, not only does he drain himself of authority, he saps his institutions of authority altogether. Then ceremony is mere ceremony. So at the end no convention has the force to oppose force, of arms or of feeling; no shared form of life controls vengeance nor shapes passion. Tragedy was the price of justice, in a disordered world. In a world without the hope of justice, no price is right.)

Now we are surrounded by inexplicable pain and death, no death is more mysterious or portentous than others, because every death which is not the fruit of a long life is now unaccounted for, since we cannot or will not account for it: not just because, taking local examples, we no longer know why a society may put its own people to death for breaking its rules, nor when it may intervene with death in a foreign place, nor because highway deaths need not happen, nor because the pollution of our air and water has become deliberate, nor because poverty has become inflicted—but because we do not know our position with respect to such things. We are present at these events, and no one is present without making something happen; everything which is happening is happening to me, and I do not know what is happening. I do not know that my helplessness is limited only by my separateness, because I do not know which fortune is mine and which is yours. The world did not become sad; it was always sad. Tragedy has moved into the world, and with it the world becomes theatrical.



Classical tragedies were always national, so perhaps it is not surprising that nations have become tragic. And of the great modern nations which have undergone tragedy, through inexplicable loss of past or loss of future or self-defeat of promise, in none is tragedy so intertwined with its history and its identity as in America. It is cast with uncanny perfection for its role, partly because its power is so awe-inspiring, partly because its self-destruction is so heartbreaking. It had a mythical beginning, still visible, if ambiguous, to itself and to its audience: before there was Russia, there was Russia; before there was France and England, there was France and England; but before there was America there was no America. America was *discovered*, and what was discovered was not a place, one among others, but a setting, the backdrop of a destiny. It began as theater. Its Revolution, unlike the English and French and Russian Revolutions, was not a civil war; it was fought against outsiders, its point was not reform but independence. And its Civil War was not a revolution; the oppressed did not rise, and the point was not the overthrow of a form of government but secession and union, the point was its identity. And neither of these points was settled, nor has either been lost, through defeat or through loss of empire or change of

political constitution. So its knowledge is of indefeasible power and constancy. But its fantasies are those of impotence, because it remains at the mercy of its past, because its present is continuously ridiculed by the fantastic promise of its origin and its possibility, and because it has never been assured that it will survive. Since it had a birth, it may die. It feels mortal. And it wishes proof not merely of its continuance but of its existence, a fact it has never been able to take for granted. Therefore its need for love is insatiable. It has surely been given more love than any other nation: its history, until yesterday, is one in which outsiders have been drawn to it and in which insiders are hoarse from their expressions of devotion to it. Those who voice politically radical wishes for this country may forget the radical hopes it holds for itself, and not know that the hatred of America by its intellectuals is only their own version of patriotism. It is the need for love as proof of its existence which makes it so frighteningly destructive, enraged by ingratitude and by attention to its promises rather than to its promise, and which makes it incapable of seeing that it is destructive and frightening. It imagines its evils to come from outside. So it feels watched, isolated in its mounting of waters, denying its shame with mechanical lungs of pride, calling its wrath upon the wrong objects.

It has gone on for a long time, it is maddened now, the love it has had it has squandered too often, its young no longer naturally feel it; its past is in its streets, ungrateful for the fact that a hundred years ago it tore itself apart in order not to be divided; half of it believes the war it is now fighting is taking place twenty-five years ago, when it was still young and it was right that it was opposing tyranny. People say it is isolationist, but so obviously it is not isolationist: since it asserted its existence in a war of secession and asserted its identity in a war against secession it has never been able to bear its separateness. *Union* is what it wanted. And it has never felt that union has been achieved. Hence its terror of dissent, which does not threaten its power but its integrity. So it is killing itself and killing another country in order not to admit its helplessness in the face of suffering, in order not to acknowledge its separateness. So it does not know what its true helplessness is. People say it is imperialist and colonialist, but it knows that it wants nothing more. It was told, as if in a prophecy, that no country is evil which is not imperialist or colonialist. So it turns toward tyranny, to prove its virtue. It is *the*

anti-Marxist country, in which production and possession are unreal and consciousness of appreciation and of its promise is the only value. The Yankee is as unpractical as the Cavalier, his action as metaphysical as his greatest literature. Yet what needs doing, could he see his and his world's true need, he could do, no one else so capable of it or so ready for it. He *could*. It's a free country. But it will take a change of consciousness. So phenomenology becomes politics.

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Since we are ineluctably actors in what is happening, nothing can be present to us to which we are not present. Of course we can still know, more than ever, what is going on. But then we always could, more or less. What we do not now know is what there is to acknowledge, what it is I am to make present, what I am to make myself present to. I know there is inexplicable pain and death everywhere, and now if I ask myself why I do nothing the answer must be, I choose not to. That is, doing nothing is no longer something which has a place insured by ceremony; it is the thing I am doing. And it requires the same energy, the same expense of cunning and avoidance, that tragic activity used to have to itself. Tragedy, could it now be written, would not show us that we *are* helpless—it never did, and we are not. It would show us, what it always did, *why* we (as audience) are helpless. Classically, the reason was that pain and death were in our presence when we were not in theirs. Now the reason is that we absent ourselves from them. Earlier, the members of the audience revealed only their common difference from the actors. Now each man is revealed privately, for there is no audience, apart from each man's making himself an audience; what is revealed is that there is no community, no identity of condition, but that each man has his reasons, good or bad, for choosing not to act. After a tragedy now, should one be written, the members of the audience would not see one another measured against nature again, but ranged against it, as if nature has been wiped out and the circle of social and historical arbitrariness is now complete. The point of reason, the thing that made it seem worth deifying, was not simply that it provided God-like power, but that it could serve to rationalize and hence to minimize distress. But the consequences of its uses, since no one is responsible for them—that is, no one more than anyone else—is that it has made everything require an answer, and only I have the answer;



that is, no one has it if I have not. And if I have not, I am guilty; and if I have, and do not act upon it, I am guilty. What we forgot, when we deified reason, was not that reason is incompatible with feeling, but that knowledge requires acknowledgment. (The withdrawals and approaches of God can be looked upon as tracing the history of our attempts to overtake and absorb acknowledgment by knowledge; God would be the name of that impossibility.) Either you have to be *very* careful what you know—keep it superficial or keep it away from the self and one's society and history and away from art and from heaven—or else in order not to acknowledge what you have learned you will have to stifle or baffle feeling, stunt the self. This is why, in the visions of Marx and of Kierkegaard, reason and philosophy must be made to end.

In such circumstances, a purpose of tragedy remains unchanged: to make us practical, capable of acting. It used to do that by showing us the natural limitations of action. Now its work is not to purge us of pity and terror, but to make us capable of feeling them again, and this means showing us that there is a place to act upon them. This does not mean that tragedy now must become political. Because first, it was always political, always about the incompatibility between a particular love and a particular social arrangement for love. Because second, and more specifically, we no longer know what is and is not a political act, what may or may not have recognizable political consequences. That, for example, editorials and public denunciations of a government now have consequences which are accommodated by that government is something we have grown accustomed to. And we have known since Agamemnon that the child of a king may be sacrificed by its parent for the success of the state. But we had hardly expected, what now is apparently coming to be the case, that the ordinary citizen's ordinary faithfulness to his children may become a radical political act. We have known, anyway since eighteenth-century France and nineteenth-century America and Russia that high art can be motivated by a thirst for social change. But in an age in which the organs of news, in the very totality and talent of their coverage, become distractions from what is happening, presenting everything happening as overwhelmingly present, like events in old theater—in such an age the intention to serious art can itself become a political act: not because it can label the poison in public words, purify the dialect of the tribe—perhaps it can't, for all words now

are public and there is no known tribe; but because it is the intention to make an object which bears one's conviction and which might bring another to himself; it is an attestation of faith that action remains mine to perform or withhold, of knowledge that the world of fashion and loss and joylessness is not all there is and is powerless if I do not give it power; it provides, apart from the good man, what evidence there is of things unseen, and is the region in which absolute virtue is, and is all that is, rewarded. Such knowledge is good for the soul. It is also good for the society which still likes to see virtue rewarded; it is destructive to the society which has lost the habit of virtue. We could also say: We no longer know what is and is not news, what is and is not a significant fact of our present history, what is and is not relevant to one's life. The newspaper tells me that everything is relevant, but I cannot really accept that because it would mean that I do not have one life, to which some things are relevant and some not. I cannot really deny it either because I do not know why things happen as they do and why I am not responsible for any or all of it. And so to the extent that I still have feeling to contend with, it is a generalized guilt, which only confirms my paralysis; or else I convert the disasters and sensations reported to me into topics of conversation, for mutual entertainment, which in turn irritates the guilt.

One function of tragedy would be to show me that this view of the world is itself chosen, and theatrical. It would show that events are still specific, that guilt will alter itself or puff itself out of shape, in order to deny debt for the specific deed for which one is responsible, that the stakes of action and inaction are what they always were, that monsters of evil are only men, that the good in the world is what good men do, that at every moment there is a present passing me by and that the reason it passes me by is the old reason, that I am not present to it. In *King Lear*, we miss presentness through anticipation, we miss the present moment by sweet knowledge of moments to come or bitter knowledge of moments past. Now we miss presentness through blindness to the fact that the space and time we are in are specific, supposing our space to be infinite and our time void, losing ourselves in space, avoided by time.

If a tragedy would not know how to look, which could bring presentness back, still it knows something: it knows that this ignorance is shared by all modernist arts, each driving into itself to main-

tain the conviction it has always inspired, to reaffirm the value which men have always placed upon it. It knows that, to make us practical, our status as audience will have to be defeated, because the theater no longer provides a respite from action, but one more deed of inaction, hence it knows that theater must be defeated, inside and out. It knows that we do not have to be goaded into action, but, being actors, to be given occasion to stop—in our case, to stop choosing silence and hiddenness and paralysis, or else to choose them in favor of ourselves. It knows that this requires that we reveal ourselves and that, as always, this is not occasioned by showing me that something happening is relevant to me—that is inescapably the case—but by showing me something to which I am relevant, or irrelevant. Oedipus and Lear could learn this by learning what, within the wheeling of events, they are affected by and what they are causing. Their tragic fact was that they could find who they were only by finding themselves at the cause of tragedy. They are heroic because they care completely who they are; they are tragic because what they find is incompatible with their existence. Our tragic fact is that we find ourselves at the cause of tragedy, but without finding ourselves.

We have, as tragic figures do, to go back to beginnings, either to un-do or to be undone, or to do again the thing which has caused tragedy, as though at some point in the past history is stuck, and time marks time there waiting to be released. Lear causes tragedy when his fast intent to shake all cares pushes his final care into the open. In normal periods, tragic acts are skirted by one's cares remaining superficial enough or mutually compatible enough for them not to suffer naked exposure. In the typical situation of tragic heroes, time and space converge to a point at which an ultimate care is exposed and action must be taken which impales one's life upon the founding care of that life—that in the loss of which chaos is come, in the loss of which all is but toys, in the loss of which there is nothing and nothing to come, and disgust with the self, natural enough at any time, becomes overwhelming. Death, so caused, may be mysterious, but what founds these lives is clear enough: the capacity to love, the strength to found a life upon a love. That the love becomes incompatible with that life is tragic, but that it is maintained until the end is heroic. People capable of such love could have removed mountains; instead it has caved in upon them. One moral of such events is obvious: if you would avoid tragedy, avoid love; if you cannot avoid

love, avoid integrity; if you cannot avoid integrity, avoid the world; if you cannot avoid the world, destroy it. Our tragedy differs from this classical chain not in its conclusion but in the fact that the conclusion has been reached without passing through love, in the fact that no love seems worth founding one's life upon, or that society—and therefore I myself—can allow no context in which love, for anything but itself, can be expressed. In such a situation it can look as if the state is the villain and all its men and women merely victims. But that picture is only a further extension of the theatricality which causes it. Our problem is that society can no longer hear its own screams. Our problem, in getting back to beginnings, will not be to find the thing we have always cared about, but to discover whether we have it in us always to care about something.

The classical environment of tragedy was the extraordinary and the unnatural, and it is tempting, now that things have changed, to say that the environment of tragedy has become the ordinary and the natural. Except that we no longer know what is ordinary and natural, and hence no longer know what is tragic and what is not (so it is not surprising that tragedies are not written). We could say that just this amnesia is our tragedy. Except that it is not amnesia and it is not necessarily bad—for it is not as if we knew or could remember a state of society in which the ordinary was the natural state of affairs. All we know is, at one time a state of affairs was *accepted* by those trained to it as natural. (From which it does not follow that all such states of affairs are good, nor even that those born to the manner found it good.) That itself may seem cause enough for envy. Yet we know no less about our own state of affairs. Except that we also know our reversals of fortune can come about through *any* change: it no longer requires the killing of kings; the heaving of past into present; a forest of enemies advancing. Our ghostly commissions are unnoticeable; perhaps they are only the half-hearted among our parents' wishes, which they would have been half-proud to see us decline and which we only half-know have been executed. Reversal can also come with a shift in what we accept as natural, as in those odd moments throughout which, as in successful prayer, we really know, say, that a black man is a man like any other; that our child or parent is a person like any other, entitled to and cursed by the same separateness as any other; that the good opinion of people we do not care about is humiliating to care about and that the bad opinion of people

we do care about may be humiliating to care about too much. At such moments the way we live appears unnatural, the world we have chosen becomes extraordinary and unnecessary, the death lingering for us seems unnatural, as though we have chosen to die as we have chosen to live, for nothing. If that is theatrical, it is equally theatrical to *look for something* for which to live or die. There are only the old things, and they are at hand, or nowhere. Then how, in space and out of time, shall we make ourselves present to them?

Hamlet dies before an audience, harping on the audience present to him, and his consciousness of himself is immortalized by his consciousness of them. That is not an option for us, not merely because we cannot command an audience, since no one's position is relevantly different from mine; but because, since no one's position is relevantly different from mine, to convert others into an audience is to further the very sense of isolation which makes us wish for an audience. Its treatment of this fact is what makes *King Lear* so threatening, together with its consequent questioning of what we accept as natural and legitimate and necessary. The cost of an ordinary life and death, of insisting upon one's one life, and avoiding one's own cares, has become the same as the cost of the old large lives and deaths, requires the same lucidity and exacts the same obscurity and suffering. This is what Lear knows for the moment before his madness; it is the edge Gloucester's blinding has led him to. Immediately after Lear's prayer (*III, iv, 28-36*), he gives himself up to the tempest in his mind and to the storm which is to destroy the world; Gloucester's thoughts, just after his prayer (*IV, i, 66-71*), turn to Dover and its cliff. That is, successful prayer is prayer for the strength to change, it is the beginning of change, and change presents itself as the dying of the self and hence the ending of the world. The cause of tragedy is that we would rather murder the world than permit it to expose us to change. Our threat is that this has become a common option; our tragedy is that it does not seem to us that we are taking it. We think *others* are taking it, though they are not relevantly different from ourselves. Lear and Gloucester are not tragic because they are isolated, singled out for suffering, but because they had covered their true isolation (the identity of their condition with the condition of other men) within hiddenness, silence, and position; the ways people do. It is the enormity of this plain fact which accompanies the overthrow of Lear's mind, and we honor him for it.

But we will not abdicate. As though this was *his* answer, while ours will come later, on another occasion, from outside. And it does look, after the death of kings and out of the ironies of revolutions and in the putrefactions of God, as if our trouble is that there used to be answers and now there are not. The case is rather that there used not to be an unlimited question and now there is. "Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is not able to answer." (Preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, opening sentence.) Hegel and Marx, as we know, found this fate not in human reason but in human history. Hegel then denied the distinction between them, Marx thought they could at last be distinguished. Hegel thought both were finished, Marx thought both could now begin. The world whistles over them. We cannot hear them.



If it is right to relate the drama in *King Lear* to the drama in music, then it should not surprise us that this source of drama disappeared from theater, for it has more recently disappeared from music as well—anyway, disappeared as something that can be taken for granted. The comparison between Shakespearean theater and tonal music is not a mere analogy, but it is not an explanation either. For it is not as if we know so well how we listen to this music that we can apply our knowledge there to the theater. On the contrary, it seems to me equally illuminating, and perhaps even closer to an explanation, to say that, when we understand, we listen to the music most familiar to us in the way we follow lines and actions in that medium which makes poetry drama. In my experience, this kind of listening is no longer fully possible with the disappearance of tonality—perhaps it is this continuous presentness which we miss most in the difficulties of post-tonal music, more than its lack of tunes and harmony and pulse rhythm. It would, I believe, be possible to study the work of serious composers of the past two generations or so, and certainly those now at work, in terms of the ways in which they avoid, and attempt to reclaim, its history of drama. This suggests that faithfulness now to the art of music is not expressed by an effort, as it may be put, to find modes or organization based upon sound itself (a form

of words which may describe all music, or none at all) but to discover what it is about sounds in succession which at any time has allowed them to be heard as presentness.

Nietzsche began writing by calling for the rebirth of tragedy from the spirit of music. But that had already happened, as drama lost the use of poetry and turned to music. What Nietzsche heard in Wagner was something else—the death, and the call for the death, of music and of drama and hence of society, as they had been known.

